The Adventures of Antoine

H. COLLINSON OWEN

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by

H. COLLINSON OWEN

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To B
In remembrance of happy
days in Paris

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CHAPTER I

THE TEMPTATION OF ANTOINE

I

WHY *La Lumière* ever came into existence is neither here nor there for the purpose of this story. Newspapers, like mushrooms, spring up in a single night in Paris, and sometimes last but little longer. *La Lumière* promised to be something of the kind and this in spite of its dignified and broad survey of the world's activities, which was importantly described on the front page as "Political, Literary, Dramatic, Social and Financial."

Everybody took it as a matter of course that its purpose in life sprang directly and solely from the last of these. Monsieur Prosper Leblanc, its proprietor, had evidently some axe to grind in the money markets. What it might be was entirely his own affair, and the staff were not greatly concerned on this point, nor on M. Leblanc's reputation as a financier. He provided the motive power for a newspaper, and their chief desire was that he might continue to do so, no matter how he obtained it.

Neither the establishment nor the staff of *La Lumière* was very large. Its home was a suite of offices on the Grands Boulevards, and here the members of the various

departments, Political, Literary, Social, Dramatic and Financial—little more than a dozen souls all told—were in convenient touch with each other. *La Lumière* had no printing or mechanical staff. The paper was produced in a huge building not far off in a side street, where a score of other newspapers were also printed, turned out wholesale like flannel.

La Lumière had now been in existence some six or seven months and everybody concerned began to feel that he was attached to an old, important and well-established organ of public opinion. The feeling that any evening might see a total cessation of activities began to pass away. On the rare occasions when M. Leblanc appeared at the office he seemed to be perfectly well satisfied with himself and the world; and the staff, keenly alive to every facial reading in its proprietor, took confidence in the "set fair" marked by the barometer. M. Leblanc had also said that the paper pleased him very much. Then all was well.

Morissot, who was responsible for the political side of the paper, and on principle fiercely attacked the Government every night, no matter how hard it tried to do its best, suddenly blossomed into a monocle, and replaced his soft felt hat by an impeccable and shining silk topper; *un huit reflets* that had glitteringly caught his eye one bright afternoon as he walked to the office, and captured him on the spot. The spirit of his example ran through the office. His colleagues felt this was a portent that could not be ignored. Morissot evidently knew something—and from then the apparel of the staff of *La Lumière* reflected the most serene optimism.

When work was over, at some time after midnight, it was the custom of the staff to meet in a small café near the offices, just round the corner from the Boulevard. They had so met from the earliest days when

the most sanguine of them gave the paper no more than a month or so of life, and when the topic of conversation dealt exclusively with one subject—the question of the vitality or otherwise of *La Lumière*. The custom had continued, although now that securer and brighter days had arrived there was a tendency on the part of one or two—Morissot, for instance, and Bourdot, an elegant individual whose keen pleasure it was to chronicle the doings of the smart and worldly side of Paris—not to consort quite so freely with the general run of the staff.

But there was one gathering every month which was attended religiously by all. This was on the last Friday, when Antoine Poiret, the general business manager, advertisement manager and cashier combined, paid out salaries. In the early days the payment of salaries had seemed a monthly miracle, so that it had always been celebrated by a general visit to the *Café de la Bonne Bière*. This had gradually developed so that the staff assembled first at the café, and Antoine, as the cashier was generally known, came round and paid them there, handing the salary packets out to the staff as they sat at the little tables. To see Antoine bustle in, smiling, conscious of the importance of his task, his pockets bulging with money which he handed over with an air, was a splendid sight.

As was natural in the circumstances, and not only because of them, he was very popular. And this in spite of the fact that he was a man with one dominating idea in life. Usually people whose minds dwell mainly on one thing are very boring. But nobody at *La Lumière* thought of calling Antoine a bore. His appearance on the evening of the last Friday in every month meant too much.

Antoine's passion in life was a roulette system with which he was sure he could make a huge fortune at

Monte Carlo. He had spent years on its study, and had tested it in every possible way, save at the tables themselves. He had never been able to do this for the simple reason that he had never been able to possess himself of twenty thousand francs. And this was the precise sum he needed in order to put his wonderful gold by the barrel," he would say.
system into operation.

"Give me twenty thousand francs, and you shall have

Nobody had ever trusted him with twenty thousand francs, and it was the grief of his life. He had tried to amass it, but without success. It is a stupid world.

'I't seems so absurd," Antoine would cry. "Cristi, all I need is twenty thousand francs and a fortune is made! And yet nobody will lend me this miserable sum." And Friday evening at the *Café de la Bonne Bière* never passed without a lecture from Antoine on the virtues of his system, and a lament that he could not raise the necessary capital to set the wheel of fortune turning.

It was six o'clock on a fine Friday evening in spring, and the staff was gathered according to custom in the café. Half an hour passed, and there were remarks that Antoine for once was late. Another quarter of an hour, and one of the younger members was sent to see what was detaining the cashier. He came back with the news that Antoine was not to be found in the offices, nor could he hear anything of him. Old Jean, the doorkeeper, who sat in the outer office to deal with callers, said that he had not seen Monsieur Poiret all the afternoon.

There was a little movement of disquiet amongst the staff at this news.

"What does this mean?" asked the elegant Bourdot, looking round at the rest.

"That there are no salaries, *sapristi,*" exclaimed Morissot.

"Let's hope he hasn't gone to Monte Carlo," said somebody with a laugh.

"But you've said it," cried Morissot. "That's where he *has* gone to."

Morissot, tall and cadaverous, was usually so self-contained, so calm and completely master of himself, that his present excitement caused something like consternation.

"How do you know?" came a startled chorus.

"Intuition—putting two and two together—what you will. I feel that it is so. I happen to know that Antoine was to touch a large sum of money from the *patron* this week. It was to start a big advertising campaign for the paper. For the first time he has found twenty thousand francs, or more, in his possession. The temptation has been too much for him. He's gone to try that *sacré* system of his. He'll lose every centime, of course, and if they catch him he'll go to prison. But what good will that do us? And what will Leblanc do? Is he going to continue running a paper when the cashier bolts with the funds? No! It may mean the end of our jobs! It may mean the end of *La Lumière! Voilà où nous en sommes!* "

Morissot delivered this disquieting discourse almost without taking breath, his eyes growing more startled every moment. When he had finished there was a dead silence. The blow was a heavy one.

"But perhaps he may still turn up," a faint voice said at last.

An excited torrent of conversation broke out at this, but no one could extract consolation from his fellows. Everybody suddenly felt that Morissot's version was only too likely to prove true. The twenty thousand

francs, the eternal system! Antoine, after all, was a monomaniac. He was the last man to be trusted with money. Why had somebody not thought of it before?

Dejectedly the staff filed out into the offices of *La Lumière*, but with no heart for work. To Morissot it seemed useless to attack the Government, when there were people like Antoine about! To Bourdot for the first time the doings of the Smart Set of Paris seemed a vain thing. What did these people know of troubles, of the cold shock when the cashier runs away with the salaries?

The wise suggestion was made that M. Leblanc should be communicated with at once, and acquainted with the matter. A council was held, and Bourdot was unanimously selected as the office representative.

Feeling very strongly the gravity and importance of his mission, Bourdot sat down at the telephone. After some trouble he got the proprietor's number. A circle of white faces was ranged round him. The staff prepared to hear one side of the fateful conversation.

"Is it that Monsieur Leblanc is there?" they heard Bourdot say suavely, in his silkiest man-about-town tones. Then his face turned a shade paler, and he dropped the receiver with a tragic gesture.

"What is it?" they shouted in chorus.

"Monsieur Leblanc has gone on a business trip to Milan and will not be back for a week," said Bourdot simply.

Black gloom, hopeless despair settled down on the office. Antoine gone! A month's salary gone! The *patron* gone! The whole staff at that moment would have found difficulty in mustering fifty francs. The situation was tragic. The readers of *La Lumière* next morning little knew what misery there was to be read between the lines of placid and unemotional type.

II

ANTOINE sat in a corner of the night *rapide*, bound for Monte Carlo. The journey was an hour old, but his face was flushed and his heart beating high.

The temptation had fallen on him late that afternoon, when for the first time in his life he had held the desired twenty thousand francs in his hands—nay, more, thirty thousad! M. Leblanc's own hurried journey to Milan accounted for this. He was not the sort of man to leave money lying about loosely, but in the midst of a discussion with Antoine in his office on the subject of the advertising campaign the telephone on his desk rang. M. Leblanc picked up the receiver carelessly.

"Allo!" he said. "Oui, c'est moi. What! To-day! Impossible." Then he was quiet a little while, listening.

"Ah, the villain!" he cried. "So it's like that, is it. We'll see about that. I'll show him. Yes, yes! The six o'clock train. I'll be there!" And he dropped the receiver.

He jumped up impulsively and paced the floor, his face working with excitement.

"Listen, Poiret," he exclaimed, looking down on the cashier of *La Lumière*. "I'm called away to Milan at once. It is an awkward moment, but there is a very big affair on there. And Bernard, you know Bernard, he's trying to cut me out. I've just been told on the telephone there. I'll show him, a fourth-rate dabbler in other people's money, whether he can get the better of a man like me. I'll show him!" M. Leblanc was very excited, and paced the floor again.

"Now look here, Poiret. I want that advertising business put in hand at once. You know now what lines to go upon. I shall be back within a week. . . . By

that time I shall expect to see matters well on their way."

He turned to a large safe let in the wall, unlocked it and took out a black box. From this he took a sheaf of notes and counted out a certain number.

"Here are thirty thousand francs—thirty of a thousand each. You will bank these this afternoon, retaining sufficient for salaries and the usual expenses of the month. Get on to those posters at once—something striking, you know, vivid. And now *au v'oir*. See that you have good progress to report when I'm back."

And M. Leblanc, who had never heard that the cashier of *La Lumière* had a consuming passion, turned to his preparations for the journey to Milan.

As for Antoine, he found himself in the sunny street with a pocket that bulged with notes; lovely large blue banknotes for a thousand francs each, thirty of them. His head swam a little. He felt uncertain of his steps.

He turned into a small café and sat down, to try and think. Since the *patron* gave him the money he had not uttered a word. He had not had a chance to. He had simply been pushed out into the street with a small fortune in his pocket.

Before Antoine's eyes came a vision of a green cloth with a wheel spinning in the center of it, and an ivory ball that jumped and clicked. Here at last fortune was in his grasp. He had only to borrow the money for a short time, go to Monte Carlo, make a fortune, and return, showering gold on his friends. No doubt the fellows at the office would be a little annoyed at the temporary dislocation of their affairs. But they would soon forgive that when they found their month's salaries doubled, nay trebled, and more. And there would be no real reason even to tell them where he had gone. He could be back in a few days and pretend he had

been ill, anything. And after all, all things are forgiven to the man who is successful.

Antoine had already fallen. It was not, he told himself, as if there were any dishonesty about it. It was not as though there were any possible doubt about his system. He knew that it would succeed. He had studied the mystery of roulette for years. He had a library of books about it. Every week he bought on the boulevards a little paper which gave the sequence of spins at Monte Carlo for every table during the preceding seven days. He had tested his system thoroughly. It could not fail.

Dishonest! Nonsense. He would be a benefactor to the whole of the staff, and they would bless him. He could run papers of his own.

Anything! He would be on the plane of M. Leblanc himself—aye, even richer and not so unscrupulous! He rose feeling that the world had turned golden.

The only thing necessary was speed. A day to go. Two, perhaps three, to enable his system to put forth its real strength. A day to return. Five days. That would be sufficient. There would be anxiety at the office while he was away. But they would not know where he was. He would not be disturbed. And think of the joy that would greet him on his return!

The night train went at nine o'clock. He had, then, over three hours to exist as best he could before he could start for the south and fortune. He sat on in the café, and the minutes seemed to drag by. The evening papers came, and he seized them eagerly, but found he could not read them. For, ever dancing before his eyes, was that vision of the green cloth, with the spinning roulette wheel and the jingling gold pieces. He had never actually seen it, but it seemed to him the most familiar thing in the world.

He decided on an early dinner, and went to a quiet little restaurant where he would meet nobody. Seven o'clock came as he was sipping his coffee. They would be waiting for him now in the *Café de la Bonne Bière*. Ah, well! It was a pity that his good confrères should be put to any inconvenience, but their trouble would soon be over and more than repaid.

He settled his bill, and took a *fiacre* to his modest rooms in Montmartre. There he packed a bag leisurely, thoughtfully putting in a panama hat to protect himself against the brilliant sun of Monte Carlo. The cab took him slowly on the long drive across the city to the Gare de Lyon. Antoine saw with relief that he had now only half an hour to wait.

He changed one of the thousand-franc notes to buy his ticket. The booking clerk looked the note over with some care.

"Come, come! It is a good one," said Antoine. "I have others like it."

"Monsieur is lucky," returned the booking clerk.

"He little knows how lucky," said Antoine to himself, and walked gaily to the train.

III

At about the very moment when Antoine was buying his ticket at the station, Morissot looked up wearily from the article he was writing dealing with the manifold iniquities of the Government. "And does this collection of suborned nondescripts think that the electors of France . . ." he was writing. But he really felt very little interest in the wrongs of the electors of France. *A month's salary!*

Suddenly he sat up and uttered a cry.

"*Sacrebleu!* Why did I not think of it before. Hey there, everybody. Come here."

Doors flew open. He was surrounded at once.

"Antoine has gone to Monte Carlo," he cried to his audience. "If he goes to-night he takes the nine o'clock train. Quick! I'll stop him! Money! A taxi will just do it! *Vite, vite!*"

"I'll come with you," cried Bourdot. "The fare for two will cost no more."

There was a hurried turning out of pockets, and a minute later the two were bounding down the stairs with some twenty francs between them.

"Finish my article, somebody," shouted Morissot. "Make it clear that the Government is the worst that ever afflicted France." And they were gone.

On the boulevard they found a taxi just passing the door, and the driver, stimulated by the promise of a five-franc tip, bounded like the wind to the Gare de Lyon. With the best of luck they would only just do it. The two sat there consumed with anxiety and impatience, too emotional to speak.

They had less than five minutes in hand when the taxi drew up at the big station. A good minute was lost in purchasing platform tickets, without which they were helpless. They dashed through the barrier and in their excitement turned into the wrong platform. Doubling back they took the right turning just as the *contrôleurs* were closing the carriage doors of the stately *Côte d'Azur Rapide*. Breathless, their hearts pumping, they ran down the train, gazing feverishly into the the windows. Suddenly Morissot stopped, and pointed wildly.

"Voilà!" he gasped, with his last breath.

There was Antoine reclining comfortably in the far corner of a carriage. They rapped on the window,

but Antoine, wrapped in his dream, did not see them. An old gentleman in a skull cap and velvet jacket, sitting near the window, gazed at them angrily.

"Quick!" cried Morissot. "We cannot lose him like this. We must board the train at all costs. We will make him pay."

"*En voiture, en voi—tu—re,*" they were shouting on the platform. The train gave a jerk and began to roll along.

The two friends ran desperately along the *rapide* seeking a way in. But the big heavy doors to the long corridor coaches were now closed, and it seemed impossible for them to jump in. They hesitated and were nearly lost. But as the train rolled majestically past them Morissot noticed an open door in the rear coach.

"Run!" he shouted, and they dashed to meet it. Morissot scrambled in, Bourdot followed him. They stood breathless and helpless—but safely in the corridor.

"We will walk along to his carriage presently and reveal ourselves to him," panted Morissot. "It will be a big surprise to Antoine."

A train official who had seen their hurried and belated entrance came walking to them along the corridor.

"Your tickets, if you please, Messieurs," he said politely.

It was an awkward moment. Morissot looked at Bourdot. Bourdot looked helplessly at Morissot.

"The fact is we have no tickets," said the latter, after a lengthy pause. "We caught the train at the last moment, and had no time to book."

"Where are you going to?" The man looked at them suspiciously.

Again the two exchanged glances. Bourdot spoke this time.

"I don't know. That is, we are going to Marseilles, and on to Monte Carlo."

"*Mais impossible!*" The ticket inspector spread out his hands. "This part of the train does not go to Marseilles."

"But this is the *Côte d'Azur Rapide.* It must do!" they exclaimed together.

"But, Messieurs, this is a slip coach. It is disconnected at Melun, and the rest of the train goes on without stopping."

"*Mon Dieu,* then we are lost," cried Morissot.

"*Ciel,* what a mess," exclaimed Bourdot.

The inspector pulled out a little book. "First-class to Melun. That will be . . ."

"Listen a moment," said Bourdot desperately. "We have a friend in the forward part of the train, and he has all our money—yes, by Heaven, *all* of it. We must get to him."

"But you cannot. This coach is not connected up with the others. The corridor ends there." He turned and pointed to the end of the coach.

"Then we are indeed lost!" said Morissot dramatically. "My friend, you must leave this matter until we get to Melun. We will explain all there. But for the moment we can do nothing."

"*Bien,*" said the inspector doubtfully. "Till Melun, then. We shall be there in just over an hour." He left them.

"Ah, that *cochon* of a Poiret, to get us in this mess. And think, *mon ami,* think that the fat rogue is sitting there within a few yards of us, his pockets bulging with our money, which he is going to throw away on

the tables at Monte Carlo!" Bourdot clenched his fists in impotent rage.

"What shall we do?" asked Morissot. "We have missed Antoine and we haven't enough money to pay our fares when we get to Melun, and no means of getting back to Paris."

"Heaven knows," exclaimed Bourdot desperately. He started to pace the corridor in his agitation. Suddenly he came back to Morissot, a new expression of hope on his face.

"Listen! In a first-class carriage there, alone, I have seen—whom do you think? None other than Monsieur Victor Bruant, one of the leading directors of this railway. I know him. I was once able to do him a service at the time of his election to the Senate. What do you say if I put the whole case before him? He may help us."

"It seems like Providence," exclaimed Morissot. "We will tell him everything."

Bourdot entered, followed by Morissot. A distinguished and well-preserved gentleman of about sixty, wearing the red rosette of an *officier* of the Legion of Honor, looked up with some surprise as they entered. Rapidly, and in his very best social manner, Bourdot introduced himself. M. Bruant was graciously pleased to remember the circumstances which Bourdot recalled.

"I have something important, something grave, on which I and my friend and confrère, M. Morissot (he introduced Morissot, who bowed), would wish to consult you."

"Speak," said M. Bruant.

Rapidly Bourdot told the whole story—*La Lumière*, Antoine's passion, his flight, and the tragic situation that though he was in the same train they were powerless to stop him in his mad course.

M. Bruant grew interested as the narrative proceeded. At last he spoke.

"I should be extremely glad to help you, but I am afraid that even I must not stop the *Côte d'Azur Rapide* before its time. But my suggestion is this. At Melun I shall be able to make all easy for you. From there you must wire to the police at Dijon to arrest this Poiret in the train, and hold him until you arrive. I shall be able to facilitate your journey to that point."

"*Tiens!* It is an idea," exclaimed Bourdot, and was immediately profuse in his thanks for M. Bruant's brilliant idea and kind help.

"But ought we to drag the police into it?" Morissot put in. "Ought we not try to settle it without their intervention? After all, this Antoine has behaved badly, but one does not want to make him a criminal. You would agree with us if you knew him."

"An excellent sentiment," said the Senator. "But show me another way of stopping him from squandering all your money. And then, again, if this matter is arranged amicably at Dijon, and you bring the fugitive back on the pretense that there has been an unfortunate misunderstanding of some kind, there will be no need for further police interference."

The two friends saw the force of this, and so it was agreed.

Shortly afterwards their coach stopped. A magic word from M. Bruant in the ear of the chef-de-gare at Melun and their troubles on the score of tickets had vanished.

"And now for the telegram," said their benefactor, as they stood on the platform. "Tell me, how shall we describe this Poiret?"

They gave an outline of Antoine's appearance; a

little vague it was, a small pointed beard being the most striking detail in their description.

"But wait," said Morissot. "He was in a first-class carriage of the second coach of the train, and his only companion was an old white-haired gentleman, wearing a black skull-cap and velvet jacket. He glared at us through the window."

Monsieur Bruant seized this information eagerly.

"That settles it," he said. "With your permission, gentlemen, I will send this telegram from the station here to the Dijon police. I shall be able to expedite it."

They thanked him again profusely as he disappeared. He was back again in a few minutes.

"I think we shall intercept your rogue of a cashier all right," he said. "I will arrange for you to go down to Dijon by the first fast train in the morning, and I trust that will be an end of your misfortunes. And now, gentlemen, my car is waiting outside the station. My chateau is a quarter of an hour's drive away. I beg of you to be my guests for the night."

In the darkness of the platform the two confrères clasped hands fervently. They were in clover, and followed their Providence to where they could see a large motor-car waiting outside the station. The smile of Fortune was directed full upon them.

IV

Antoine, lying back in a corner of the comfortable first-class carriage, had fallen into a light sleep, in which he dreamed that he was rolling down the hill of Montmartre in a barrel of gold. The train stopped, and he awoke.

Looking through the window he found that they had

arrived at Dijon. It was early morning and the movement and bustle of the station sounded loudly in the still air. His one companion in the carriage was fast asleep, with his mouth open. Antoine had tried to enter into conversation with the old gentleman in the skull cap, but had found him quite disinclined to make chance acquaintances.

There was a sudden rush and babble of voices on the platform, and Antoine looking through the window saw under the light of the lamps a Commissaire of Police, girt with his official tricolor sash, accompanied by two policemen. The Commissaire looked excited and inflated with importance. A cold feeling coursed down Antoine's legs, down to his toes, as he saw the emissaries of the law were boarding the coach in which he was.

In a moment he heard their voices in the corridor. He was consumed with fright, and had he not been for the moment physically incapable of movement he would have opened the window and dropped out. A second later the Commissaire stood in the door of his compartment, the two policemen behind him, and a group of railway officials behind them.

The Commissaire saw the sleeping figure of the old gentleman with the skull cap, and his face lit up. He glanced at a telegram in his hand, and then without a word he dropped his other hand on the shoulder of the old gentleman, and shook him vigorously.

The old gentleman opened his eyes, and looked up.

"What is it?" he demanded testily, in the tone of one who is not accustomed to interference.

"Your name is Poiret," said the Commissaire, bluntly and loudly. "Come with me."

"My name is not Poiret, and I shall not go with you," returned the victim, with spirit.

"*Hein!* What do you say?" The Commissaire's

voice was unnecessarily loud, but he felt the gravity of his mission. "Your name is not Poiret! That is too good. I suppose next you will be telling me that you are not old, and that you do not wear a skull cap and a velvet jacket. You know what I'm here for. Will you come at once, or will you be carried?"

The old gentleman glared at his tormentor, bewildered and angry.

"You are mad," he cried. "My name, if you want to know it, is Robespierre, and I live in the Rue du Cherche Midi, Paris. And now, Monsieur, if you don't mind, will you please take away your detestable presence and let me go to sleep again."

The Commissaire laughed in rare good humor.

"Robespierre! That is good. That's a new trick. My compliments. But people don't have names like that nowadays. You'll be saying your name's Napoleon Bonaparte next, or Charlemagne. *Allons!* Do you shift, or do I call my men?"

"Idiot—imbecile!" hissed the old gentleman. He seemed ready to froth at the mouth. "Touch me if you dare!"

"It is enough," said the officer of the law, his official patience at an end. He stood aside and beckoned to his men. They approached to seize the little man.

But he suddenly developed the energy and fury of a wild cat. In a moment the three were in a heap on the carriage seat, and Antoine, fascinated and horrified, watched the unequal and inelegant struggle. Numbers and weight told. In a few moments the little gentleman, his skull cap torn off showing a highly polished bald head, was secured; breathless, but his eyes still glaring, he had no energy left for further speech, but as he was thrust through the doorway his eyes looked devilish things at his captors.

Antoine felt as if he would faint. He became aware that the Commissaire, still in the doorway, had removed his hat and had turned to him with a bow.

"I am exceedingly sorry, Monsieur, to have had to derange you," said that official, with a charming smile. "It has been a painful scene, but it is my duty. You will understand, I am sure. *Bonne nuit.*"

Antoine tried to speak, but only made a noise in his throat. With another smile and bow the Commissaire was gone.

Through the window Antoine saw the tragic little group cross the platform and enter one of the waiting-rooms. The old gentleman had begun to kick again, but his captors held him firm. Antoine felt as if he must shriek aloud. And then the train moved slowly out of the station, leaving the terrible mistake behind.

He wiped his brow, which was clammy and cold. It had been an amazing escape. He thanked the fates that he was alone in the carriage, with none to observe his agitation.

His flight was discovered, then, and somebody was on his track. But who could it be? Leblanc had left for Milan. Then it must be somebody at the office. Antoine felt reproachful towards them. To pursue him in such brutal fashion! They little knew what he intended doing for them. Possibly they did not realize it yet, but it was sheer ingratitude.

But the situation was now altered. He was not now to be allowed calmly to go forward with his scheme at Monte Carlo, and to return triumphantly to Paris burdened with money. And yet he could not renounce his golden project, and go back tamely to the office and apologize for his absence. What was he to do?

His mind was soon made up. He must hurry the affair. Speed was necessary. He had time. The

regrettable mistake made with the vigorous old gentleman would take time to clear up. He had perhaps two full days in hand. He would make all the money possible in the shortest time, and then when his tormentors caught him up he would say finely, with a contemptuous gesture: "*Voici!* I have made all this. Take it!"

Breakfast time found him at Marseilles, with a golden sun in a blue sky. Antoine was beginning to feel the strain of the last twelve hours, and he could not drive out of his mind the picture of the fiercely struggling old gentleman. He determined to seek him out later, and compensate him handsomely. It would be in his power to be generous, and make amends for the error.

"It was very fortunate for me, all the same," he murmured.

The train ran into Monte Carlo station shortly after noon. Antoine's emotion, when at last his feet touched the platform, was considerable. He could hardly believe it.

"*Enfin!*" he murmured. This was a moment which had occupied his waking and dreaming hours for half a lifetime. And now at last the miracle had arrived. He was there, at Monte Carlo, with the necessary money in his pocket to achieve swift fortune. For twenty years he had desired this day. He could have embraced the porter who picked up his bag.

"Why are you not rich?" Antoine asked him instead.

"Monsieur says?"

"Why are you not rich? You live in Monte Carlo. It is enough. Why do you carry bags?"

"Monsieur is joking," said the porter. "Everybody is not rich in Monte Carlo. There are some even who come here rich, and leave very poor."

"They must be imbeciles," said Antoine with decision.

He felt sorry in a way for these poor devils. His heart was beating so with joy and excitement that he felt he wanted to skip along in the sunshine, beneath the lovely palm trees. He paralyzed the porter by pressing a golden louis into his hand. It was his offering to Fortune, this gift to the first person with whom he spoke on Monte Carlo soil.

The business of the hotel over, Antoine hurried to the Casino, and caught his breath as he first beheld the imposing white building, gleaming in the sun. He hurried up the famous flight of steps worn by the feet of countless gamblers, lucky and unlucky, and found that there was a small vexatious delay because of the necessity of getting a ticket for the rooms. But another golden louis here paved the way to immediate attention. At last he passed through a noble door, and stood within the rooms.

There was a shrill and constant chirrup in the air, like the voice of many sparrows outside the bedroom window in the early morning. It was the voice of gold; the musical ring of innumerable coins being tossed about and raked up and down on the dozen or more of roulette tables which were already in full swing. To Antoine it seemed like celestial music, or a hymn of Gold sung in praise of his infallible system.

He approached the first table, and joined the crowd around it. He saw a roulette wheel spin for the first time, heard the little ivory ball jump and click, and saw how money was lost and won. He saw how other people were playing on systems, with little books before them which they consulted carefully, like accountants adding up figures, and in which they wrote down more figures from time to time. Antoine smiled a little pityingly. It was droll that they should be searching for a system when he had it in his pocket all the time!

For an hour he watched the play. The man behind whose chair Antoine was standing was losing heavily. At last he got up, his face dark and frowning. Antoine took his place, brought out his own books, and with a smile at the croupier as if to say "Sorry, I shan't be able to help winning your money," he began to play.

V

Monsieur Bruant proved to be a charming host. He greeted his guests warmly when they met at breakfast next morning.

"Messieurs," he said. "I have an idea. It will do this Poiret of yours no harm to cool his heels in the cells for another twenty-four hours. I am a widower. My children are married. I am alone in this big house for the week-end. Why not stay with me until to-morrow morning, and then go on to claim your prisoner? As I say, the waiting will do him good."

Morissot looked at Bourdot, and Bourdot looked at Morissot. Their duty was to refuse this tempting offer, and take Antoine back to Paris at once, to where the sorrowing and anxious staff, deprived of a whole month's salary, awaited him feverishly. But their host was so charming, his chateau so comfortable and magnificent. . . . It would be delightful to spend another day there. And, moreover, the wait would certainly do Antoine good.

They looked at each other again, and fell.

"We shall be charmed," they said in chorus.

A telegram came while breakfast was in progress saying that "the man Poiret" had been detained, and asking for further instructions.

"I can see Antoine from here," said Morissot. "How

miserable he will be, to be caught like this just as he is about to put into execution the dream of his life. Almost I can feel sorry for him. There is only one Antoine. But it will do him good, assuredly, and the money is safe."

They laughed at the idea of the impetuous Antoine cooling his heels in the cells, and their host shared the joke.

"What a lucky accident it was that you saw me in the train," he said. "Otherwise . . ." And his gesture was eloquent of money disappearing in large quantities.

A reply was sent asking that Antoine should be detained until the following day, when Messieurs Morissot and Bourdot would call for him.

"When you go to-morrow," said the Senator, "I will give you a letter to the Commissaire. My name counts for something in Dijon. Then, if you so wish it, the affair can be treated as one in which further police intervention is not desirable. And of course, by that time Poiret will see that it is much better to come back quietly with you than be left in the hands of the police. You bring him back with the money, and all will be well."

With that they went out for a long motor ride, returning in the evening. It was while they were sitting at an admirable dinner that Morissot suddenly made an exclamation.

"Heavens, what will they be thinking at the office?" he cried.

"I, too, had forgotten," said Bourdot miserably. "They will be in a fine stew."

"Write them a letter of explanation to-night," said their host. "That will put them at their ease."

It was done, the trials and adventures of the two being described in moving terms; the letter winding up

with the good news that Antoine would soon be brought back with the money practically intact.

M. Bruant next morning gave them the letter to the Commissaire of Police, and insisted on pressing a loan of two hundred francs on them for immediate necessities. Another letter made them free of the railway to Dijon and back to Paris.

"I shall be here for two days more," he said, as he saw them into one of his luxurious motor cars, waiting to take them to the station. "Be sure and let me know how everything goes on, and in the event of any emergency wire me. I shall be only too happy to help."

"I did not know there were such good people on earth," said Morissot fervently as they drove away.

"Say then, *mon ami*, do you not see the advantage of having a large acquaintance amongst distinguished people?" returned Bourdot proudly.

It was afternoon when they arrived at Dijon. They proceeded at once to the police station and asked to see the Commissaire, and on explaining their business were immediately ushered into his presence. That worthy greeted them with great *empressement*. He was cordiality itself after he had read the letter from M. Bruant.

"I am happy to have been the means of serving you, Messieurs," he said. "This man Poiret is a curious customer."

"Is he all right?" Morissot asked.

"Quieter now. But he has been very violent, extremely violent. He kicked on his cell door most of the night. And by the way, he sticks to a story that he is not Poiret. Says his name is Robespierre. Oh, a clever one, I assure you."

The two friends looked at each other with some surprise.

"And what is the affair exactly?" said the Commissaire with a smile.

Morissot spoke hurriedly.

"Well, it is rather a curious business, Monsieur le Commissaire. There has been a misunderstanding. M. Poiret has behaved a little rashly, that is all, and it is imperative that he should be seen in Paris again at the earliest possible moment. M. Bruant is interested in the case." An inspiration came to him. "As a matter of fact, there is a lady concerned. Monsieur will understand, I am sure."

"Perfectly," said the Commissaire with a smile. "We are men of the world, is it not? And now, shall we go and see this Poiret. All is quiet, by the way. He is probably sleeping."

The Commissaire rang a bell, an *agent-de-police* appeared, and they were conducted along a gloomy corridor.

"This is the cell," said the Commissaire importantly. The policeman opened the door, and they stepped inside.

It was rather dark, and the two friends at first could only make out the outline of a bed in the corner, on which a man seemed to be lying down asleep. But the Commissaire soon put an end to that.

"Ho, there, Poiret," he called loudly. "Wake up. They have come for you at last."

The figure on the bed moved and sat up.

"They have, have they?" came a rasping voice out of the twilight. "Then you, idiot of a policeman, shall soon learn something."

Bourdot clutched Morissot by the arm. This did not sound like Antoine's voice.

"Here we are, Antoine," said Morissot, soothingly. "We have come to arrange matters amicably. Come! We are all going back to Paris."

"Oh, the devil we are." The little figure suddenly leaped off the bed. "And are you the blockheads who are responsible for this?"

M. Robespierre stood before them, his face, pallid from want of sleep, working with passion. Morissot gave a cry and sprang back.

"Good God," exclaimed Bourdot.

"But what is it?" cried the Commissaire. "What is the matter with you all?"

"This is not Poiret," the two friends cried in chorus.

"Not Poiret!" exclaimed the Commissaire. "But I ask you. The skull cap, the velvet jacket. It must be Poiret. If it is not Poiret, who is it?"

"For two days, idiot, I have been telling you my name is Robespierre," croaked the little man. "Now perhaps you will believe me. You have made an enormous blunder, and you shall pay heavily for it."

"But—but—the telegram," spluttered the Commissaire. "I have it. You shall see it. Gentlemen, come to my office."

He darted out of the cell, leaving the others to follow. Morissot and Bourdot, bewildered and troubled, ran after him, with M. Robespierre, making vindictive noises, bringing up the rear. When they arrived at the office they saw the Commissaire already looking, with a startled gaze, at a piece of paper in his hand.

"*Sapristi!*" he said as they came in. "It is only too true. This telegram was read in a great hurry, preparations were immediately made, a mistake was committed. It was taken to mean that the old gentleman, wearing the skull cap and velvet jacket (he bowed to M. Robespierre, who scowled in reply) was the person wanted. *Mon Dieu, mon Dieu!*"

The Commissaire was in a high perspiration, and he

found it impossible for his eye to meet the steely gaze of M. Robespierre. But something had to be done.

The Commissaire braced himself up for the ordeal of apology.

"Monsieur," he said, "I cannot express how distressed I am that this regrettable error should have been committed. I offer you a thousand humble apologies. I appreciate now to the full the agitation of mind under which you have been laboring ever since—er—ever since our first meeting on the train. Monsieur Robespierre, again I apologize most humbly. I do not know what to say more, except to hope you will understand that I thought I was doing my duty."

He sat down again, wiping his brow nervously. This aged little man with the unfaltering gaze was almost terrifying.

"It is no part of an official's duty," rasped M. Robespierre, "to make egregious errors in the reading of a simple telegram and to arrest an obviously respectable citizen in the place of a rogue. I am not without influence in Paris, Monsieur, and I can promise you that I shall make the most of this. No doubt you will hear more later."

The Commissaire turned a little pale. "As you wish, Monsieur," he said, with dignity.

Morissot and Bourdot had been standing tonguetied during this distressing scene. They were stunned by the terrible mistake, and by the realization that while they thought Antoine was safely under lock and key and they were enjoying themselves, he was instead busily squandering the money at Monte Carlo. And now there was this awkward business with M. Robespierre. Morissot looked at the implacable little man, and it suddenly seemed to him that the face and name were familiar. Ah, he had it!

"Excuse me, Monsieur, but are you not the famous Monsieur Robespierre who wrote that admirable and monumental work on Egyptian Mythology which I had the pleasure of reading some time ago?"

For the first time a softer expression came over the face of the outraged little gentleman.

"I am indeed he, Monsieur, and I was making my leisurely way to Egypt, via the Riviera, when this foolish official took possession of me."

The Commissaire was no fool. He knew how to make the best of a good moment.

"But what a misfortune!" he cried. "You are truly the famous savant, M. Robespierre of Egyptian fame! Monsieur, I cannot express to you how desolated I am. Only the other day a friend of mine who knows Egypt well was saying to me that your book is the classic of all time. He . . ."

"His name?" demanded M. Robespierre.

"Ah, you would not know him. His name is Duval; he is an official in the finance department—quite a modest position, but he takes an almost passionate interest in all that concerns ancient Egypt, and he told me that for him your book had become almost his Bible." Never in all his official career had the Commissaire lied so magnificently.

"Ah!" It seemed as though a gentle radiance shone forth from under the parchment complexion of M. Robespierre. "It is good to know that there are people who appreciate the labors of a lifetime. Give my respects to your friend when next you see him."

"I will, most assuredly," said the Commissaire.

"And now, Monsieur," broke in Morissot, who wished to encourage the gentler spirit now manifesting itself, "may we tell you the story of why this distressing mis-

take arose?" And before he could be stopped he plunged into the narrative of Antoine and *La Lumière*.

"Then that person who would try and talk to me was your Antoine Poiret," said M. Robespierre.

"And I apologized for disturbing him!" groaned the Commissaire. He banged his desk savagely.

"It is a most interesting story," said the Egyptologist. "What do you propose to do?"

"I suppose we must go back to Paris without him," said Bourdot.

"Nonsense!" cried M. Robespierre. "Give up the chase at such a moment! Never! Follow him to Monte Carlo, and no doubt you will yet be in time to save much of the money. And I will come with you. It is on my way, and I have a fancy to see more of this Poiret who has caused me so much discomfort."

"Listen," said Morissot hurriedly to Bourdot. "We will do it. We will telegraph to the Senator telling him how things have gone wrong, and he will telegraph instructions here for us to be allowed to go on. We shall be able to take the night train and be at Monte Carlo to-morrow."

"Agreed," said Bourdot.

"It is a wise decision," said M. Robespierre. "And now, gentlemen, I propose to leave this too hospitable place at once."

His face darkened again, and he turned to the Commissaire.

"Monsieur, what are we to do about this unfortunate affair? It is no light error that you have committed. What reparation do you propose to make?"

The Commissaire spread out his hands with a hopeless gesture.

"Monsieur Robespierre—*cher Maître*—what can I do? I am in your hands—and I have a family—a large

family. I have already two children and—who knows?—some day there might be another. It is in your power to make matters most awkward for me if you wish. It was an unfortunate error—an excess of zeal. Monsieur Robespierre, I throw myself on your compassion. And, *tenez!* I will buy your famous book, and will vie with my friend Duval in my admiration of a master who is so justly celebrated."

M. Robespierre considered for a moment, and then smiled.

"So be it," he said. "We will leave it at that."

"I thank you infinitely, *cher Maître,*" said the Commissaire, bowing low, his face all smiles and happiness.

They took ceremonious leave of him, and the three passed out into the street.

"To the telegraph office first," said M. Robespierre briskly, as he stepped along at a fine pace. "That Commissaire is the most perfect liar I have ever met. With that and his zeal he should go far."

VI

Antoine's first experience at the tables was a most pleasant one. In two hours, playing steadily and unemotionally, according to the dictates of the system, he had won five thousand francs. This encouraged and puzzled him at the same time. He had expected to lose at first, and the system allowed for this. But if Fortune intended to smile broadly from the very beginning so much the better.

At this point he left the tables for dinner. He had not forgotten that haste was necessary, but after all a man must dine. And he felt that all was well. The question that exercised his mind most was why he had

not come to Monte Carlo years ago. He was here now, and it all seemed so easy.

He dined extremely well, but swallowed his coffee with haste, left the splendors of the hotel behind him, and almost ran the few yards down the hill to the Casino. He found a place immediately at one of the tables, and sat down feeling master of himself and of all the world.

He put his little books of moves and calculations before him, changed notes, and placed half a dozen little piles of gold beside the books. Then coolly, methodically, his brain clear, undisturbed by the spin of the fascinating wheel and heedless of the exclamations and emotions of others round him, he began to play.

He lost steadily. At first he was indifferent to it. The system would soon begin to speak. But as the night wore on and, with occasional runs of prosperity, the bank claimed one pile of gold after another, he began to feel a slight anxiety. Not in the intrinsic truth and eventual triumph of the system. That was infallible. But would it work quickly enough? So that when his pursuers came up with him he would be able to point magnificently to the fortune he had already amassed.

By midnight when the rooms closed he knew he had lost a good deal. He made a rapid calculation in his little books and found that he had lost five thousand francs he had won during the afternoon and nearly eight thousand more on the top of them.

It was serious—but by no means desperate. The system was only biding its time. On the morrow it would show its hand in full force. His head was busy with figures as he walked back up the hill. In his bedroom he ran rapidly through the well-known formula with which he had now lived for twenty years. Everything was all right. If only he was not hurried! Tomorrow would make it all right. He slept fairly well.

He was down before the tables opened next morning. To his surprise he found every seat occupied by a shabby-genteel crowd of men and women, most of them middle-aged or old. He went to the seat which he had occupied when he won the five thousand francs. An old hag in a piteous hat rose as he approached.

"You can have my seat for ten francs, Monsieur," she whispered. "It is a very lucky seat."

"I do not believe in luck," said Antoine. But he gave her the ten francs all the same.

"*Faites vos jeux*," cried the croupier. His voice was clear. It was the first spin of the morning. The old lady put her ten francs on the red, the black turned up and she went away with a grimace, and an exclamation of disgust.

"So much for luck," said Antoine to himself, as he turned to his books.

* * * * * *

Antoine lost heavily throughout the morning. The system seemed to be playing hide and seek with him. Time after time it gave him successful little runs, during which the piles of gold before him grew larger. But always when the time came to stake heavily, so as to win in one grand coup more than he could lose in a dozen small ones, the system seemed to elude him with a chuckle and his gold disappeared into the bank. Time after time he changed notes for more gold. The croupier took them as impassively as a Chinese god, put them in a heavily grilled metal box by his side, and tossed out in return a stream of sparkling gold pieces.

The crowd left the tables towards the lunch hour and Antoine finding himself almost alone went out. He lunched at the Café de Paris opposite, and again dipped into figures. Another five thousand francs gone! This was unfortunate. His faith in the system was still un-

shaken. He had worked on it for twenty years and knew it would not fail him. But it was a little slower in getting to work than he had anticipated. If only those idiots in Paris had left him alone, and were not hurrying him. He had needed time and calm.

"Courage and calm," he said to himself as he walked back to the rooms. "The system cannot fail." He saw nothing of the gaily dressed crowds on the terraces, nor of the beautiful panorama of mountain and blue sky and sea. He saw only the glittering white walls of the gaming house, and the people streaming up the Casino steps and into the great gaming rooms.

He played on, a growing anxiety in his brain, but fascinated by the struggle of his own ingenuity against the hazard of that spinning wheel. The dinner hour came and went, and the croupiers were changed, and he noticed nothing. He saw only the green cloth with the gold spread over it; heard only the click of the ivory ball in the wheel and the voice of the croupier announcing the result. His fingers ached with marking down figures in his little books. More than once he was on the brink of despair, when there came a little run of winning coups which seemed to have been sent expressly to save him from destruction. He passed into a sort of stupor, in which his hands moved mechanically placing money on the cloth, and marking down his figures. He did not awake until the croupier bent down to tell him that play was over for the night.

Antoine walked back to his hotel in a whirl of emotion. In his bedroom he made a rapid examination of his affairs. Of the thirty notes of a thousand francs each with which he had left Paris he had now only twelve, and some loose gold left. That is, he had lost eighteen thousand francs, and the twenty years' attention to his system had always shown that twenty thousand francs

was the maximum capital needed to make fortune secure. His faith in the system was beginning to be terribly tried. But it was by no means dead. He had two thousand francs of the original capital left, and ten thousand more to back that up. He would try, and succeed, on the morrow. When at last he slept he had a beautiful dream that he had broken the bank.

It was late when he awoke. He decided to defer his final assault on fortune until the afternoon. There were lines along his forehead and his mouth was set as he sat down to play again. In an hour the two thousand francs had gone. Should he now risk the final ten thousand francs? His hesitation did not last more than a moment. He had gone too far to draw back. It was all or nothing now.

But still fortune was obdurate. Steadily his money flowed into the bank. Antoine's face grew haggard. The corners of his mouth were turned down desperately, and the perspiration stood out on his forehead. He lost his head. A hoarse chuckle escaped him, unnoticed in the buzz of the table. Curse the system. It had failed him. He would try a game with luck. He staked here, there, anywhere, at hazard, as the fancy took him. Four times in succession he played the maximum on red, and red turned up faithfully. He turned to black, and four times the wheel seemed to follow his bidding. Recklessly he placed the maximum on Zero. His chances of winning were only one in thirty-three. Everyone at the table waited for the result of his coup. A murmur went up as the wheel slowed down and the ball was seen to click into Zero.

The croupier pushed a heap of notes and gold towards Antoine. A crowd began to gather about him, and Antoine, in an intoxication of success and utter recklessness, went on playing and winning.

VII

THE three pursuers got out of the train at Monte Carlo tingling a little with the excitement of the hunter who is at last nearing his quarry.

"Let us go direct to the Casino," said M. Robespierre, who was the only one who was familiar with the place. "We will take the lift."

"Let's hope we shall be in time to save a little from the wreck," said Bourdot, with resignation, as the lift took them slowly up the face of the rock on which Monte Carlo is built.

They walked quickly to the Casino, and waited feverishly at the end of a line of people in order to obtain cards of admission to the gaming rooms. At last they passed in.

The rooms were crowded. Every one of the score or more of tables, roulette and *trente-et-quarante*, was going merrily. They wandered about the hot and stifling atmosphere, searching every table, but could see no trace of Antoine. The hearts of the two friends sank with apprehension. They had made a sad mess of it. Why did they waste that precious day at Melun?

At last there remained but one table which they had not examined. There was a big crowd round it, which made near approach impossible. There was obvious excitement among the people watching the play, but they were unable to see the cause of it. They stood on the edge of the crowd, nervous and tantalized.

"I feel that we shall find Antoine here," said Morissot. Every now and again a murmur of excitement came from the crowd. It was maddening.

"You are strong. I am small," said M. Robespierre, practical as ever. "Lift me up to peep over their heads."

They both bent to the task, which was no heavy one. M. Robespierre looked over a small sea of feathered hats to where a man, the center of all this interest, sat with a large pile of notes and gold before him. His face was flushed and drawn; his eyes gleamed with excitement. As M. Robespierre looked, the wheel stopped turning, there came another murmur from the crowd, and a further pile of gold balanced delicately on the top of a large note, was pushed towards Antoine.

M. Robespierre bent down and spoke in a whisper. "It is he—Antoine—the man who was in my carriage. And he is winning money by the bushel."

Their heads pressed against M. Robespierre's waistcoat. Morissot and Bourdot gazed into each other's eyes, their faces suddenly shining with happiness and relief.

"The sacré system! It is all right then, after all!"

"Praise heaven!"

M. Robespierre waited aloft for another turn of the wheel. Again Antoine won. M. Robespierre descended to earth.

"It is incredible," he said. "The man is rolling in money!"

"What shall we do?" asked Morissot.

"Leave him alone so long as he is winning. The moment his luck shows signs of turning you must break in and stop him."

"But it is not luck, it is his system."

"His system is it? Then the moment it shows signs of breaking down you must step in and prescribe for it. Total rest." And M. Robespierre chuckled. "I will continue to watch."

They hoisted him aloft again. M. Robespierre knew something of the game of roulette. He saw Antoine place a pile of fifteen gold pieces on number 29. "The

man is mad," murmured the little gentleman. A number of punters followed Antoine's lead with smaller sums. There was the usual pause, the usual suspense while the wheel made its journey—and the croupier shouted out "twenty-nine." Antoine had won again, and nine thousand francs in notes and gold were pushed towards him.

"It is fantastic," murmured M. Robespierre.

Five times following this did Antoine win. He seemed to have the wealth of the world gathered before him. A little group of casino officials, grave and frock-coated, were gathered round the chair of the croupier, near to Antoine, who, at the bidding of a quaint conceit which had come to him, still from time to time consulted his books of useless figures. He won again, and there was a little stir of excitement among the usually impassive officials. The croupier began to pay out. Suddenly he stopped and with a little smile turned to the officials behind him. One of them walked away swiftly. A murmur of excitement ran round the crowd at the tables. The bank was broken! The croupier could not pay out.

Antoine sat there as if petrified, only vaguely conscious of the excitement that buzzed around him. In a few moments two stalwart attendants in uniform walked up with a large, heavy box. Amidst further excitement it was opened, and scores of *rouleaux* of gold were extracted and placed in the croupier's bank. The croupier began to pay out immediately, the grave officials busying themselves with the unpacking of the box.

"*Faites vos jeux!*" cried the croupier. Monte Carlo, calm and unshakable, was itself again.

M. Robespierre bent down to the two friends.

"He must be stopped at once, now while he has won! If he goes on, in an hour he may have no money left.

At present he has more than he knows what to do with. Quick! Round to the other side. We must push in behind him at all costs."

They dashed round the table. Owing to somebody changing seats there was at that moment an opening in the crowd near to Antoine. M. Robespierre darted into it before it closed again; he put his lips close down to Antoine's ear.

"Morissot and Bourdot are here," he hissed, in an intense whisper. "You must come at once—at once, do you understand—or there will be trouble."

Antoine turned round in his chair and looked full into the eyes of the little man whom he had last seen being carried out of the railway carriage. Those piercing eyes, alight with an excitement and vivacity which Antoine mistook for wrath, seemed to look through him.

"I will come," said Antoine.

"Change that heap of gold into notes, and get up at once," the whisper commanded him again.

Antoine did so, bestowing a handsome present on the croupier. He placed the thick wad of notes which was before him carefully in an inside pocket, and left the table. In another moment he was face to face with Morissot and Bourdot.

"At last!" they said in chorus. They looked hungrily at Antoine. He represented a whole month's salary, now long deferred, to each of them.

"Why did you follow me?" demanded Antoine. He began to realize that he had a part to play, and so long as he did not meet those gimlet eyes of M. Robespierre he felt capable of doing it.

"*Mais sapristi!* You ran away with all our money," rapped out Morissot. "The whole staff is left there stranded. You leave us without twenty france between us, and run away with a fortune. It was our duty to

come, we came as much as anything else to save you from yourself."

"*Tiens!* I like that," laughed Antoine. "At last after twenty years' waiting I get the chance of putting my system to the test—of making a fortune. And just when it is going splendidly"—Antoine here met M. Robespierre's eyes and averted his gaze—"just when it is going splendidly and money is beginning to roll in you come along and spoil matters. And I, who intended to enter Paris like a conqueror, my pockets full of notes and gold which I should have bestowed on my dear confrères, am chased down here as though I were a criminal. It is fantastic! Ah non, where is your gratitude?" And Antoine threw his arms wide in a gesture of indignation.

Bourdot and Morissot looked at each other in amazement. They had expected a humiliated and repentant Antoine suing for mercy, and promising not to do it again. But this! M. Robespierre turned away to hide a chuckle.

They were in the open air now, walking along the terrace in the glorious sunshine, Antoine still talking in a very aggrieved tone. Suddenly Bourdot's face went very white and he grasped Morissot's arm in a tremendous grip.

"Look who comes," he said hoarsely.

Morissot looked, and there immediately in front of them he saw none other than M. Leblanc, smiling, in the best of humors, a lovely lady on his arm.

M. Leblanc saw them in the same moment. He looked with amazement from Bourdot to Morissot. Then his eye fell on Antoine, and he stood as if transfixed. It was obvious that he was thinking very hard.

He said a word to the lady with him, and handed her to a seat. Then he walked up to the three members of

his staff. Antoine saw him for the first time and stared, fascinated.

"Bon jour, messieurs," said M. Leblanc with studied politeness. "May I inquire why three of the foremost members of the staff of *La Lumière* have chosen this moment to come together to Monte Carlo?" His gaze rested with especial intensity on Antoine.

For a moment nobody spoke. The shock of meeting him was too great to allow of an easy invention at the bidding of the moment. At last Antoine's voice was heard.

"It is very simple, Monsieur Leblanc. The matter will be easily explained if you will give us a few moments of your valuable time."

"I have just descended at the Hotel de Paris," said the proprietor of *La Lumière*. "Meet me in the *foyer* there in ten minutes." And he turned again to the lady.

The party walked slowly to the hotel.

"What are you going to say?" exclaimed Morissot.

"I shall tell him the simple truth," said Antoine. "He is a financier. He will understand. And success justifies anything. I have succeeded."

They sat down in a quiet corner of the entrance hall of the gorgeous hotel. In a few minutes M. Leblanc walked up to the group. He shot a quick glance at M. Robespierre.

"Permit me to present Monsieur Robespierre, the famous savant and Egyptologist," said Morissot. M. Leblanc bowed, but said nothing.

"And now," said Leblanc, fastening his gaze on Antoine. "I left you a few days ago with a large sum of money, and instructions as to how to proceed on a new advertising campaign. I did not imagine that you would find it necessary to come to Monte Carlo."

"True," said Antoine. "But the matter is simply

explained. I also have something of the financial instinct. For many years, moreover, I have been possessed of an infallible system at roulette. Unfortunately I have never had the capital necessary to exploit it. Your hurried departure the other day provided me with the means. I borrowed the thirty thousand francs for a few days. And I shall be happy to repay them to you now, together with more than the usual interest."

The face of M. Leblanc was a study as he heard this calm proposal. His eyebrows worked convulsively. He looked as though he would fall on Antoine. At last he exploded.

"And so that is what you do the moment my back is turned. You scoundrel! Borrowed my money, do you say. Stolen it you mean. The police shall hear of this, and at once."

"It is absurd to say I have stolen your money," said Antoine. "See!" He pulled a very thick wad of large notes from his inner pocket. "There are your thirty thousand francs, together with a good many more of mine."

M. Leblanc was a financier. The sight of this large sum of money moved him. In spite of himself he could not help respecting a man who had made money quickly, by whatever means.

"How much have you won?" he asked shortly.

Antoine licked the end of his finger and began to turn over the sheaf of notes. It seemed as if he would never stop.

"I seem to have won about two hundred and fifty thousand francs," he said at last.

"And how long did it take you to win that sum?"

"About a day," said Antoine airily.

"Do you realize," said the financier, in low but in-

flexible tones, "that all that money—winnings as well as capital—belongs to me?"

Antoine turned very pale.

"I won it, every centime," he replied, with some agitation. "It is the fruit of twenty years of study, the product of my brains. You can have your thirty thousand francs at once—with a further ten thousand as interest for the little time during which I made a convenience of your capital."

"Thank you," said the financier drily. "But I am afraid I must take the lot. You are my servant, and you have invested my money. Hand it all over to me at once, capital and interest, or . . ."

"Or what?" Antoine's voice came hoarsely.

"Or—I hand you over to the police. That is the alternative. Now decide at once. The money—or I send on the spot for the police."

"But Monsieur Leblanc! You would not do that," Morissot's voice broke in.

"Ah! Precisely! That reminds me. What are you two doing here? Are you accomplices in the affair?"

There was nothing to do but to explain, even though it meant matters going hardly with Antoine. So, briefly, and letting Antoine down as light as possible, Morissot told the story of the chase from Paris, explaining at the same time the part played in it by M. Robespierre.

M. Leblanc's face hardened.

"So!" he exclaimed. "This man not only ran away with the money, but disorganizes a great newspaper. My back is turned for a few moments, and everything goes to pieces. Come! The money or the police! Which?"

Antoine's face was white and haggard. But he was not going to give in without a struggle.

"I have no money of yours," he said. "The thirty thousand francs you gave me is safely under lock and key in Paris. I came to Monte Carlo for my health. I was overworked, and needed rest. While here I decided to try my system, working with the modest capital I had brought with me. I won. That is all. Now I return to Paris, benefited by my trip. I shall begin on the advertising campaign with renewed energy. It is all to your benefit really."

M. Leblanc burst into a roar of laughter.

"This infantile bluff!" he cried. "Come, for the last time. Which do you do?"

"Listen!" gasped Antoine, at bay now. "There is my system. See what it has done for me. You shall share in that."

"Enough!" cried the financier, his face dark and angry. "We have played too much already. The next word is with the police."

He stood up suddenly and looked around, about to call a servant of the hotel. At that moment a large and soberly-dressed man holding a bowler hat in his hand approached the angry financier. He was followed by two other men of the same type.

"Monsieur Leblanc?" inquired the first in a low tone.

"C'est moi," replied the financier. "What do you want?"

"I belong to the Monaco Police," said the stranger. His words could only just be heard by the others. Antoine gave a little gasp and seemed about to collapse in his chair. The newcomer handed his card to the financier.

"Pray what do you want with me?"

"The two gentlemen with me," went on the stranger,

"are detectives of the Paris Sûreté. Are you Monsieur Prosper Leblanc, Director of the Equitable Savings Bank of the Thrifty Peasant?"

"I am." M. Leblanc looked suddenly anxious.

"Then I am afraid I must ask you to come with us."

"And why, pray?"

"One of your employés has given certain information to the police authorities in Paris. A perquisition was made at the premises of the bank. Its affairs are judged to be in so unsatisfactory a state that, er—that, in short, your presence is desired immediately."

"But this is an outrage," said the financier in a low but intense voice. "I shall refuse to come."

The two detectives behind closed up immediately.

"It will be better if you come quietly, and so avoid all scandal here in public," were the quiet words of the one who had done all the talking.

M. Leblanc turned round to the group at the table, as if to ask their help. He glared as his eye fell on Antoine, and seemed about to say something. But something had happened which made the thirty thousand francs seem a bagatelle. M. Leblanc's affairs involved millions—and the millions, as he knew better than anybody, were very much involved indeed. His arms dropped to his sides with a gesture of despair and resignation to his fate, and he walked quietly away, discreetly surrounded by his escort.

Antoine mopped his brow with a shaking hand.

"*Sapristi!*" he murmured. "What an escape! And to think the patron should be taken instead of me. . . . But, after all, he is a real thief!"

VIII

They all sat at dinner a little later.

"And so the poor old paper is finished after all," said Morissot. "And our salaries, *hein?* Gone also! What shall we do?"

"Not at all," said Antoine. "There is the thirty thousand francs intact. I have those in hand for petty expenses. The money shall be divided amongst the staff in lieu of notice. And to it I will add fifty thousand of my winnings. You will not do so badly, you and the confrères."

"But you, Antoine," put in Bourdot. "You will be an immensely rich man. You have your system. It has triumphed, your fortune is made."

M. Robespierre choked a little with his soup.

Antoine looked at him, and then at his friends.

"Eh bien, mes amis, I have something to tell you. I would have sold my system to M. Leblanc, true. But to you I must say the truth. My system was a total failure. I was just on the point of ruin—of losing all. The thirty thousand francs would have gone, my friends been betrayed. Then, reckless, desperate—I plunged—and won. Chance, luck, the good fortune that smiles on desperate men—what you will—came to my aid. And friends, I am cured. From to-day I renounce gambling. My system I will give to anybody who wants it . . . ."

The head waiter approached the table with a large visiting card in his hand. "Monsieur Poiret?" he inquired.

Antoine took the card and read, "M. Victor Bellefille."

"Who is it? I do not know him."

"M. Bellefille is a high official at the Casino," said the head waiter. "He is waiting in the lounge and

would be glad of a few minutes with Monsieur when it is convenient."

Antoine passed a hand wearily over his forehead.

"I cannot see him. I have been through too much."

M. Robespierre picked up the card, a gleam of excitement in his eyes.

"This man must be seen," he said. "I have an idea. Do you three gentlemen give me full powers to act in your place?" He looked from Antoine to the other two.

They agreed at once and the little man hastened away. He did not return until they were sipping their coffee. He sat down with a chuckle. There was mirth in his eye. They looked at him, consumed by curiosity.

"I have sold the system," he announced. They gasped.

"Yes, I have sold the system to the Casino authorities, in the names of you three gentlemen—all three of you. The conditions are that you," he turned to Antoine, "assure them that the system is your own invention, that it is known only to you, and that you agree never to impart it to anybody else."

"And the price?" They spoke in a breathless chorus.

"Half a million francs!"

Antoine buried his face in his handkerchief. His shoulders heaved, as with uncontrollable laughter. But when he lifted his face again they saw he was in tears.

"It is too much," he said. "I cannot speak."

* * * * * *

They sat smoking in the lounge, near to the spot where M. Leblanc had so hurriedly left them.

"Between ourselves," said M. Robespierre, "I imagine that the authorities are not tremendously impressed with the value of the system, or its danger to them. But they know a good advertisement when they see one,

and they decided to make use of your experience. From time to time they like the world to hear of a sensational coup. Luckily for you they decided to make you a victim of their subtle publicity. The fact that you broke the bank, and that they then brought off your system—this will filter throughout the world. Wherever there is a gambler, his fingers will itch at the story of your luck. They will come flocking from afar, with their own systems. Monte Carlo will not be the loser."

"Ah! That explains a lot," said Antoine. "I was wondering a little. But the world will not be entirely a loser, either. We will keep *La Lumière* going, and Paris shall at last have a newspaper worthy of it. If we wait our time we shall be able to buy it for a packet of cigarettes. And then, think of it! I, Antoine Poiret, Business Director. You, Morissot, Political Director. Parliament will be open to you, the moment you like to walk into it. And you, Bourdot—your influence in Society will grow, your name will be mentioned in every *salon;* the world of art, of literature, of the theatres, is yours. . . . And you, Monsieur Robespierre, how can we repay you?"

The famous savant laughed through the smoke of his cigar.

"I? I have no fierce ambitions. I have lived too long for that. But I will contribute Notes from Egypt on the subject of my excavations. And whenever I feel that life is dull I will think of *La Lumière* and its three Directors."

CHAPTER II

"LA DOULOUREUSE"

I

Monsieur Antoine Poiret, Business Director of the enterprising and well-esteemed Paris journal, *La Lumière*, sat in a corner of the Café de la Bonne Bière eating a modest but well-cooked dinner. It was here, just round the corner from the offices, that the members of the staff often came to dine when time pressed, and Antoine, though now a person of supreme importance at *La Lumière*, did not disdain to patronize the little café where in earlier days he had come as cashiere to distribute the salaries of the staff.

Antoine, with his co-directors, Morissot and Bourdot, had now been in charge of the fortunes of *La Lumière* for some four months. The examination of M. Leblanc's affairs, following on his arrest at Monte Carlo, had revealed such a condition of wholesale chicanery that the officers of the law hardly knew where to begin to unravel them, and in the meantime M. Leblanc still languished in the Santé Prison. *La Lumière* had fallen into liquidation, and the three friends had been able, as Antoine had prophesied, to secure it for "a packet of cigarettes." With the money they were able to put down they easily obtained further capital, and the paper was now giving every promise of a prosperous future.

But all the same, the three directors of *La Lumière* would have liked to see its march toward greatness accelerated a little. They wanted—or at any rate Antoine did—to do something startling. They wanted Paris to talk about their paper. The point had often been the subject of discussion between the three, although this sort of thing was left chiefly to Antoine.

Bourdot had other things to do. Small and elegant, he was now one of the best dressed men in Paris. His waistcoats were a dream. He lived luxuriously in those social circles which were his especial delight, and was accounted somebody. He was on speaking terms with every duchess in the Faubourg St. Germain and pretty actresses besought his attention.

As for Morissot, it was next to impossible to get him to take any interest in anything outside politics, and the iniquities of whatever Government happened to be in power. His pen seemed to be dipped in vitriol, and his daily article had become a feature of Paris journalism. His tall cadaverous figure, a monocle in his eye, became known on the Boulevards. Now that he was in a position to do exactly as he liked he desired only to be left to his beloved politics.

Thus Antoine was left to himself in thinking out his schemes for greater fame and circulation.

A sensation. But how? He had just finished an excellent *ris de veau*, and had called for coffee, when the door of the café opened and Bourdot came in.

"I was told you were here," said Society's favorite. He looked round the modest café with some disfavor. "I have been to a reception *chez* la Duchesse de Pau. Everybody was there. But that is not what I came to see you about. I have an idea for you. To-day I visited the Louvre—a rendezvous with a certain charming person"—Bourdot gave a twist to his neat mous-

tache—"but never mind that. It struck me then how badly our national treasures are guarded. I was standing by *La Douloureuse*—Leonardo da Vinci's incomparable masterpiece, the most famous picture in the world—and imagine it! there wasn't a *gardien* within sight of me! I could have put that enormously valuable little picture under my overcoat and walked off without a soul seeing me. I walked through other galleries, and it was the same everywhere. With the exception of the Venus de Milo who is rather heavy, practically anything could be stolen. . . ."

"Yes, but the idea," said Antoine, a little impatiently.

"I am coming to that. Why not start a campaign for the better guarding of our national treasures? Attack Binot-Varillon. It would be popular. He has been Minister of Fine Arts far too long. No matter how often the Government changes you will find him back again. Show Paris that our national treasures of incalculable value are not so well guarded as a pair of cotton stockings at the Bon Marché. Say . . ."

"One moment," interrupted Antoine, his eyes suddenly agleam, "that's all right as far as it goes—but why not steal *La Douloureuse?*"

"Steal *La Doulorueuse!* You're joking."

"Not really steal it—but say it has been stolen. Why not publish the news that the masterpiece has been stolen, and been replaced by a copy. There are always artists there copying these *chefs d'œuvre.* We will say that this has been done—that the real *La Douloureuse* is already across the Atlantic, in the possession of an American millionaire who has paid a fantastic sum for it. That will shock Paris. There will be a great sensation, the Ministry of Fine Arts will deny it, but a lot of people will believe us. Then when the scandal has got well started we will confess that the

story is a fabrication—but point out that it was done to draw attention to the criminal way in which our treasures are left unguarded. Paris will laugh. We shall be forgiven—but we shall have a sensation. Hein?"

"It is ingenious—but it is going too far." Bourdot shook his head. "We could hardly do that."

"But why not. *La Lumière* still has its way to make. It wants to be noticed. We fabricate a sensation—but in a good cause. The moment we announce why we have done it Paris will be with us. I tell you, Bourdot, it is a splendid idea. It grows as I think of it." His arms were waving now eloquently. "I can see the excitement in Paris; the anger at the news that the greatest of all pictures has been stolen; the doubts when the official denial is given—and then the relief and the roar of laughter when we explain. Come, we must put this to Morissot. We shall have all Paris talking to-morrow."

Bourdot brightened up a little at this. Antoine's enthusiasm was of a very infectious quality. But he had a last word to say:

"Listen, Antoine. This is your affair, your responsibility. . . ."

"Ah! you take life too seriously! There is nothing to fear. Your duchesses will laugh. You will be more popular than ever. Come!"

They found Morissot deep in a scathing attack on the Government's foreign policy. The Government was only six weeks old, but Morissot had already laid to its charge an appalling list of crimes and errors.

He laid his pen aside and listened to Antoine's lyrical exposition of the scheme.

"It seems rather an extravagant idea," he said when Antoine had finished; "but if you have made your mind

up I suppose there is no use in trying to stop you. Binot-Varillon has certainly many enemies in the Government. . . . I leave it to you." And he picked up his pen again.

"So be it," cried Antoine. "Bourdot, *mon vieux, en marche!* Tell Paris in your own admirable way how she has been ravished of her proudest treasure."

II

THE article appeared next day. It was on the front page, in bold type and adorned with sensational headlines. It told Paris how the most famous and the most historic painting in the world had been stolen from the treasure-house of the capital and taken away across the broad Atlantic.

"What is a few million dollars, more or less, to these American millionaires with their fantastic fortunes?" wrote Bourdot. "But to Paris the loss is irreparable. She has been ravished of *La Douloureuse,* and while some Transatlantic Croesus gloats in secret over the marvel which he is compelled to keep hidden from the eyes of the world, the City of Light is bereft of this incomparable gem of the Italian Renaissance, this glittering jewel of pictorial art."

Antoine was down early at the office next morning. The first sign of interest came in a telephone call from the *Echo du Soir,* an evening paper, which desired to know what truth there was in the story. Antoine took the receiver.

"*Mais comment!* Do you think *La Lumière* would publish such a statement unless it had the very best grounds for doing so?"

"But then, if true, this matter is of the very first importance. It is a national scandal."

"Perfectly," returned Antoine.

"But we have communicated with the Ministry of Fine Arts," the voice over the telephone went on, "and they assure us that there is not a word of truth in the story."

"Naturally. But do you suppose them at once to confess to a scandal which will electrify France? Of course, they will deny it—to the last moment."

"Then we publish the story on your authority. Have you any further details to give us?"

"Not at present. But look in *La Lumière* to-morrow morning. Possibly you will see something there. . . . Bon jour, Monsieur."

Antoine hung up the receiver gaily.

"*Ca marche!*" he murmured. "We are getting publicity. Paris will hum with this to-day."

Within the next half-hour there were inquiries from four other evening papers. There were urgent requests for something more corroborative in the way of detail, but these Antoine begged politely to decline for the present.

With the early afternoon the first editions of the evening papers were out. All of them reproduced boldly the article of *La Lumière*. One of them had a special article recounting a visit paid by its representative to the Louvre, where the picture of *La Douloureuse* was still hanging on the wall.

"But was this the original or the copy?" the account asked. "Mystery! That is a point which can only be settled by the experts."

The afternoon seemed to pass very slowly. Bourdot went out to see what the Boulevards were saying, and came back in half an hour with the report that every-

body was talking of the affair. People were asking was it blague or was it really true? Generally the inclination was to believe the story.

"It's warming up," said Antoine with a chuckle. "I wonder what we shall tell the public to-morrow? Events must decide."

"Listen! What's that?" said Bourdot suddenly. "They are shouting something on the Boulevard."

They opened a window. Down the broad avenue a number of shabby *camelots* were tearing, shouting at the top of their voices and waving a fresh edition of the evening papers. The two strained their ears to catch what was being shouted. At last from the hoarse chorus the message came to them: "Disappearance of *La Douloureuse* from the Louvre!"

They looked at each other.

"Disappearance!" said Bourdot. "What does that mean."

Antoine laughed.

"It means, *mon vieux*, that we are being taken seriously. The officials have removed the picture to examine it and see if there is anything in our story. But send for a paper quick, and we shall see."

Bourdot ran out himself, thinking nothing of dignity. He caught a flying *camelot*, and was back in a twinkling. He spread the paper out on the table.

The announcement was very short. In the morning, it said, the famous picture (or its copy) was still there. In the afternoon it had disappeared. The officials of the Louvre, questioned, maintained a discreet silence. At the Ministry of Fine Arts there was no information to be obtained. What could this mean? Had *La Douloureuse* now been stolen for the first time, or was it simply that M. Binot-Varillon had had the picture removed in order to test what truth there might be in

the report given that morning in *La Lumière*? Events would show. In the meantime careful inquiries were being continued.

"As I thought," said Antoine gleefully. "But this is a splendid development. Paris will certainly talk about us now."

Morissot came in at this moment. People were snatching up the evening papers, he said. The affair was the only subject of conversation in the cafés.

"Bravo! It couldn't have gone better!" Antoine rubbed his hands. "Binot-Varillon is taking us seriously. Before the evening is out he will be compelled to make an official statement. He will, of course, issue a complete denial of our story. In that case what do we . . ."

There came a loud rat-rat on the door. Jean, the doorkeeper from the outer office, entered, a visiting card in his hand. He handed the card to Antoine.

"This gentleman is waiting in the ante-room, Monsieur, and says he desires to see somebody in authority at once."

Antoine stared at the card in his hand and without a word passed it on. The others read and saw:

M. Paul Victor Binot-Varillon,
Sous-Secrétaire d'Etat au Ministère des Beaux-Arts.

Bourdot turned a little pale.

"Sapristi! The Minister of Fine Arts! What do we say?"

"The only thing to do," said Antoine, "is to hear what he has to say first. No doubt he is very annoyed. But we must see him. Jean, show the visitor in."

III

A MOMENT later M. Binot-Varillon entered. A rather portly and extremely distinguished-looking gentleman of any age between fifty and sixty, he carried a shining silk hat in his hand and the rosette of an important decoration in his buttonhole.

"Messieurs," he said, and bowed, with a sweep of his hat, which included all three.

"Permit me, Monsieur le Ministre," said Antoine. He presented his two companions and himself, carefully assigning to each his proper station in the control of *La Lumière*. Then he pushed a chair forward for the distinguished visitor.

"Be seated, Monsieur, I pray you," he said in his very best manner.

M. Binot-Varillon sat down, placed his hat carefully on his knees, and regarded the three Directors of *La Lumière*. Then he spoke:

"You are aware, Messieurs, I presume, of the reason of my visit."

The three Directors nodded. They were prepared for a torrent of reproach.

The Minister spoke again, but his tone was quiet.

"May I ask you, Messieurs, what it is you propose to do in the matter?"

"To do?" said Antoine, feeling rather helpless. He felt that it was as good a reply as any other.

"Exactly. What is the next step you propose to take?"

The three Directors exchanged glances. This was awkward. Here was Binot-Varillon asking what was the next step in their campaign. It seemed to take the wind out of the whole scheme, and besides, they didn't know themselves.

"Er, may I ask why you wish to know?" said Antoine at last.

"*Ma foi!* Why I wish to know?" For the first time their visitor showed some animation. "And who should wish to know, if I do not; I am the Under-Secretary for Fine Arts. I must know at once."

Antoine passed his hand over his forehead. This was bewildering. He looked at his companions, but they did not help him. Did M. Binot-Varillon expect to be admitted on the spot to all the secrets of *La Lumière?*"

"And you wish to know what we intend to do next?" said Antoine after a further pause.

"Precisely."

"Then, M. Binot-Varillon, with all respect, I am afraid that is quite impossible."

"Evidently," said Bourdot.

"Of course," said Morissot.

The three directors were firmly agreed on this point.

The Under-Secretary for Fine Arts seemed about to become very angry, but controlled his emotion.

"Listen, Messieurs. I wish to conduct this affair as delicately as possible. But you must see that the attitude you are taking up will become, sooner or later, an impossible one. I beg of you, act frankly with me, and all yet may be well. Otherwise . . ." and he spread out his gloved hands with a gesture that might have meant many things.

"And what precisely is it you desire?" asked Antoine again.

"I desire, Messieurs, in my official capacity as an Under-Secretary of State, to be taken into your complete confidence."

"Then I can only repeat, Monsieur, that for the present at any rate, it is quite impossible."

"And how long shall I have to wait for your confidence?"

"Ah, who can say?" said Antoine, with his pleasantest smile.

But these words had quite an unexpected effect on the Under-Secretary. The custodian of the national treasures jumped to his feet and banged his clenched fist hard on the table in a passion.

"Then, Messieurs," he cried, "I must warn you that you are placing yourselves in a very dangerous position. The most famous picture in the world has been stolen . . ."

"What!" The cry of amazement that came from the three Directors as from one man should have told the Minister something. But he was too agitated himself to judge aright the meaning of their exclamation.

"*La Douloureuse* has been stolen," repeated the Under-Secretary, now shouting with anger, "and it is you, gentlemen, who have announced the fact to the world. You must know who the thief is. If you persist in shielding him then the State will persist in knowing how far you may share the responsibility of the crime."

A tense silence followed this outburst. Antoine, Morissot and Bourdot gazed at each other in stupefaction. Their brains were in a whirl. Could this amazing thing be true? *La Douloureuse* really stolen? But there was M. Binot-Varillon telling them so! Antoine felt as if he wanted to laugh hysterically. The impossible thing he had invented so light-heartedly the night before was a fact!

M. Binot-Varillon gazed with some satisfaction on the impression his grave words had created.

"I see, Messieurs, that you are not wholly insensible to the hint I gave you. And now, please—the name of

the thief or thieves!" He faced Antoine, as the spokesman of the three.

Antoine's fingers played nervously in and out of his pointed beard. This was the very devil of a situation. Should he tell the truth at once? The Under-Secretary might not believe it. And then there was *La Lumière* to be considered. By Saint Denis! they had stumbled on the sensation of a century. That could not be lightly thrown away. It would mean the making of the paper for all time. But then again, how were they to take further advantage of it? They knew nothing more of the mystery than Binot-Varillon himself. They might even be accused of stealing *La Douloureuse!* Who would then believe their story?

These thoughts, and more, flashed like lightning through his brain. This angry Under-Secretary was gazing at him fixedly all the time, tapping his fingers impatiently on the table. Sapristi, what was to be done! Let him think calmly just for a moment.

Bourdot's voice broke the silence.

"I think, Monsieur, that if you will permit, we will retire for a moment and discuss this matter together." He looked swiftly across at Antoine, whose face shone with sudden relief at the words.

"If Monsieur will permit?" he added.

A frown of keen disappointment crossed the Under-Secretary's face. For a brief moment he had flattered himself that he was on the point of learning the truth of an affair which—ever since an appalling moment early that afternoon when it was discovered that the true *La Douloureuse* had really been replaced by a clever copy—had made his well-ordered life change suddenly into a horrid nightmare. And here these three wretched journalists were about to go and talk over a

mystery which at that moment he would have given half his personal fortune to be at the end of.

"Messieurs, I warn—I implore you. Put an end to this at once. You are good citizens, you are loyal Frenchmen. You should not have a moment's hesitation about giving up to justice a wretch who has ravished France of so much. Tell me the truth I pray you, and put an end to this agonizing suspense. Tomorrow all France will be waiting to hear the truth. What can I tell them?"

Antoine, as he looked at the now agitated face of the Minister, and saw his evident anxiety and distress, felt an impulse to tell him the truth. But then, what had they to tell him? And there was *La Lumière.* That must be their first consideration.

"I regret, Monsieur le Ministre," he said, as gently as possible, "but it is absolutely necessary that we should confer on this matter. But we shall be back very shortly. I beg of you to excuse us." And with a bow to their agitated visitor, the three withdrew.

"A miracle!" exclaimed Antoine when they were alone. "To think the thing I imagined yesterday—the incredible thing—should now prove to be true. What a triumph for the paper, *mes amis.*"

"Yes, but what are you going to do with it?" said Bourdot, a little coldly. "All you know is that the masterpiece has been stolen. How are you going to extract advantage from the situation when you know nothing?"

"That is true. We are as much in the dark as our poor friend there. But are we to tell him we know nothing? No! We at once lose all our power in an amazing situation. Think what our rivals would give to know even what we know now! Must we then send him away thinking we know a great deal? Yes! After

all, anything may turn up. We may yet be able to tell the world the full story of the theft of *La Douloureuse*. Think of it! *La Lumière* first with such a piece of news! My friends, *pour l'amour de Dieu*, think of it! You thought I was foolish in announcing an incredible thing. The incredible becomes true. Do we then turn back at such a moment? Never!" Antoine's face was aflame with excitement and enthusiasm.

"And the police?" said Morissot simply.

"Ah, bah! The police! What then? Even if we fail . . . but we shall not fail. I feel it. Come friends, enthusiasm, audacity! We should be cravens, miserable wretches, to show our hands at such a moment. Napoleon believed in his star. Let us believe in ours."

Bourdot and Morissot exchanged glances.

"The incredible has happened, it is true," said the first. "There is just a chance, of course, that it may happen again."

"It is just possible," said the other. He shrugged his shoulders.

"Bravo!" cried Antoine, breaking in. "We are agreed, then. The incredible will, it must, happen again. And now to Binot-Varillon. But first of all we must find out how much this poor Minister knows about the affair. He should be more useful to us than we can be to him. Come!" And he led the way swiftly back again.

"And now, Messieurs," said the Under-Secretary hopefully, as they entered.

"First of all," said Antoine, "we should be glad if you would be good enough to tell us when the news of the theft first came to your knowledge."

"But to-day. Frankly, when your article was first shown to me I roared with laughter. But in face of such a categorical charge it was my duty to have the

picture examined, especially as there were many inquiries on the matter during the morning. The examination was made early this afternoon. To our amazement—to our horror—it was seen at once that, as your admirable paper had stated, a substitution had been made."

"There is no doubt of that in your mind?"

"None, alas! The copy is a very clever one, and might pass scrutiny from the public that visits the Louvre. But to the expert eye the abominable imposture shouted aloud at once."

"And has your department no theory as to how or when the substitution was made?"

"Alas, but little. The panel was new, and was almost certainly made in Paris. The work, as I say, is that of a skilful artist. Beyond that we know nothing so far."

"And has the matter yet been put into the hands of the police?"

"Not yet. That is a point which depends to some extent on you. If we could get the masterpiece back immediately it is possible—I cannot promise this—but it is quite possible that we should be glad to let the matter develop no further. But you stated this morning that the picture had already gone to America. In that case, of course, it would largely be an affair of diplomatic arrangement. And now, Messieurs, I beseech you."

Antoine drew a long breath. This was not easy.

"Monsieur le Ministre, we regret to say that at present it is absolutely impossible for us to throw further light on this mysterious affair. Could we do so we should be most happy, but at present our lips are sealed. Every profession has its inviolable secrets—its code of honor, which it cannot break. I need hardly tell you

that none of us has anything to do with the theft of this incomparable treasure. The knowledge of it has come to us in the most accidental fashion. But this we are glad to promise—that the moment we are able to tell you anything more we shall be only too glad to do so."

Antoine spoke with admirable suavity and courtesy. But as he spoke the countenance of the Under-Secretary changed from expectancy to disappointment again, and from that to dark anger.

He rose abruptly. They rose and faced him across the table.

"And that is your last word, Messieurs?" he inquired with frigid politeness.

"For the present—we regret."

"*Bon!*" The exclamation came like a pistol shot. "I had hoped this matter might have been pursued amicably. But in face of your attitude I see that other means must be employed. You shall hear more."

And with a bow the Minister was gone.

"There goes one who thinks we are in league with rogues," said Antoine. "And now we must do some hard thinking. It will be no easy matter to decide what is to appear in *La Lumière* to-morrow morning."

"For my part," said Morissot, "I shall make a special political note on this scandalous affair. After all, with a Government like this, one may expect anything."

IV

The press of Paris next morning reflected a singular incoherency on a matter which had suddenly become one of national importance. Some papers said that *La Douloureuse* had been stolen, and some denied it flatly.

Others frankly confessed they did not know, and said furious things about the Minister of Fine Arts, whom they had tried in vain to interview. Only a minor official at the Ministry of Fine Arts had been seen, who said that it was quite true that famous picture had been examined but he had the fullest reasons for believing that everything was in order. M. Binot-Varillon, he explained, was not in town, or he would have made this announcement himself.

But although opinions were so varied huge headlines and excitement on "The Mystery of *La Douloureuse*" were universal.

As for *La Lumière* it appeared with a very short announcement which was the result of much anxious thought between the three directors. It merely asserted in very black and bold type that its sensational story of the day before was (alas!) true, but that for the moment reasons of a grave nature prevented *La Lumière* from supplementing this information. Soon *La Lumière* hoped this embargo would be removed, and its readers should know all of one of the most remarkable and romantic happenings of modern times.

It was just the sort of thing to sharpen the interest of the Paris public to fever heat.

All that morning the telephone bells of *La Lumière* rang frantically. Inquiries came from every conceivable kind of person. Antoine reached the office about eleven o'clock, and had only sat down in his room for a moment when an excited young man entered. This was Durand, the general reporter of *La Lumière*, who delighted in murders, burglaries and crime of all kinds.

"I have been answering the telephone all the morning," he said. "It is fantastic."

"And what have you told them?" asked Antoine, smiling.

"Parbleu, what could I tell them? And, apropos, can I do anything? . . . I would give anything to be engaged on this mystery."

"Not yet, my good Durand. Perhaps in good time we shall be glad of your services."

Left to himself Antoine ran quickly through the letters on his table, with a vague hope that there might be one amongst them which would throw light on the mystery of *La Douloureuse*. But all were plain, straightforward business letters. There was no mysterious communication asking for a secret meeting when all would be revealed.

He pondered. The situation was difficult. They were not the only ones who were temporizing. Binot-Varillon was evidently doing the same thing. He had refused so far to tell the public the truth, hoping that something would come to light which would enable the authorities to recover the picture before the scandal broke. And *La Lumière*. It could not go on telling the public morning after morning that some day it would hear the truth. The joke then would be against *La Lumière*.

An idea came to him. He rang for Durand, who appeared in a flash.

"Go down to the Louvre," he said, "and see if *La Douloureuse* is in its place or not. That's all."

Durand disappeared, delighted to be in touch with the great mystery.

Antoine had been thinking hard about the problem all night. Desperately, he resumed his labors now. They ought to be able to turn the situation immensely to the advantage of the paper. But how? He could see no way out. They were against a brick wall.

Providence entered in the shape of Jean.

"There is an individual outside, Monsieur, who de-

sires at once to see somebody in authority. He says his business is most important."

"What is he like, this individual?"

"He looks like one of these daubers in paint who live in a garret in Montmartre. I should say he was certainly a painter." Jean submitted this in a tone of strong disapproval.

Antoine looked up.

"A painter! Show him in at once. But quickly, Jean!"

A painter! Could this mean something? In a few moments a tall dark man walked slowly through the door. He was shabbily dressed, in a faded velveteen jacket and loose trousers, and he carried a soft and shapeless black felt hat in his hand. He had an ample beard and moustache, but Antoine judged him to be a man of little more than thirty. His features were good and his nose strongly aquiline, but his eyes had a tired expression, and he looked like a man who had lived unwisely. Antoine motioned him to a seat.

"Merci, Monsieur." The visitor spoke in deep and slightly husky tones. "May I have the honor of knowing whom I am addressing."

Antoine detailed his name and station, not without a touch of pride.

"Parfait! You may possibly guess, Monsieur, the nature of the business on which I am come."

"On the contrary" said Antoine blandly.

The visitor gripped the arms of his chair. He cast a swift glance round the room, as if to be sure that nobody could overhear. Then leaning far over the table he spoke in a low and intense voice:

"How came you to know that *La Douloureuse* was stolen?"

Antoine stared fascinated at the visitor. Here, then,

was the key to the mystery, this shabby, gloomy individual! But what to reply to him?

There came a sharp rap on the door and Jean entered with a visiting card in his hand. The idiot! Antoine looked at him angrily, but Jean advanced fearlessly and without a word placed the card in the Director's hand. Antoine read it, and started:

Paul Sauvage, Inspecteur de la Sûreté.

The police already! And at such a moment! Just when he was on the verge of knowing something!

"He desires to see you without any delay," Jean murmured.

"Did you say I was in?"

"He says he knows you are!"

Somehow these words brought a chill to Antoine. They seemed to breathe the power of the police. Antoine waved Jean out of the room.

What to do? Where the deuce were Bourdot and Morissot? He must decide quickly. It would never do for the Inspector to see his visitor. He would put two and two together in a flash. He would pounce on them both like a hawk.

"Listen to me!" Antoine spoke intently to the mysterious visitor. "There is soneone here whom I must see at once. It is imperative—although I should very much like not to see him. *Tenez!* I will show you his card."

He held it out across the table. The visitor looked at it, and his face turned a shade paler. A terrified look came into his eyes. He looked around the room as if seeking to escape, and half rose in his chair.

"Do not go," said Antoine. "If you try to pass out of the building you will be seen—and understood! These Inspectors have sharp eyes. Through this door is an empty room where you can be in peace. If

you wait there until he has gone I give you my word of honor that I will not tell him of your promise."

"You promise," croaked the visitor, his eyes still wild.

"On my honor."

Antoine opened a door and passed into the next room. It was the room where Bourdot recorded the doings of the social world, and it had the advantage that there was no way out of it save through Antoine's room. Thus his visitor could not escape without running the gauntlet of the Inspector.

"An idea," said Antoine. "You are an artist, is it not? Take off your hat and coat. Here is paper and a pencil. Sit down at this table and if by any chance anybody should enter, you are here, working for the paper. *Comprenez?*"

The visitor nodded and sat down.

Antoine returned to his room, rang for Jean and desired him to show in the Inspector at once.

Inspector Sauvage in his neat dark blue suit and bowler hat had the air of a typical father of a family. But he had also the reputation of being one of the most alert and relentless criminal hunters of the Paris police.

"*Bon jour, Inspecteur,*" said Antoine, cordially.

"*Bon jour, M'sieur.* You are M. Antoine Poiret, Director of this journel?"

Antoine bowed.

"Good. We will come to the point. I wish to know all that you know about the theft of *La Douloureuse.*"

"That will not take long," said Antoine with a smile. "I know nothing."

The detective looked hard at him.

"*Ecoutez, M'sieur.* We will be frank. It is no good trying to play that game with the Sûreté. You are a Director of *La Lumière.* Your paper announced

the theft of the picture. Now—I will be frank again. I do not believe at present that you were directly concerned in the theft of this masterpiece. But you know something of the manner in which it was stolen. I wish—the police authorities wish—that you should tell all you know."

"I repeat that I know nothing of how it was stolen."

"M'sieur, you are playing with me. But we will put it another way. When did you first hear that *La Douloureuse* was stolen?"

"Yesterday afternoon," said Antoine calmly.

The detective bounded in his chair.

"Yesterday afternoon! But you announced it in yesterday morning's paper."

"True. But I did not know that it was really stolen until M. Binot-Varillon himself told me yesterday afternoon."

The detective stroked his dark moustache with a slow gesture. His eyes glittered as they rested on Antoine.

"Ah, M'sieur, I see. You jest with me. But understand me well, it is a jest that may turn sour for the joker. And so, this treasure which you announced was stolen in the morning—you did not really know that it had been stolen until M. Binot-Varillon told you in the afternoon. *Parfait!* Very amusing. We shall see."

"It is true what I tell you, Inspector," said Antoine earnestly. "Let me explain. I announced that *La Douloureuse* had been stolen for a certain reason. At the time I did announce it I had not the slightest idea that such was the case—had anybody told me so I should have said it was impossible, absurd. But then, mark what happens. The Ministry of Fine Arts examines the picture and finds to his stupefaction that *La Douloureuse* really has gone. M. Binot-Varillon comes here to ask me all about it, and it is only when

from his own lips comes the startling news that the masterpiece has disappeared that I know *La Douloureuse* had indeed been stolen."

"Ah!" The Inspector's eyes twinkled with something like mirth. "And so you expect me to believe that."

"It is the truth, the simple truth."

"And why did you announce this news if you did not believe it?"

"For purely business reasons. It was the beginning of a campaign which I was about to start for the better protection of our art galleries and museums. You see yourself, Inspector, how badly it was needed."

"Hm!" Inspector Sauvage seemed for the first time as though he thought Antoine might be neither a madman nor a knave. "And since M. Binot-Varillon called yesterday have you learned anything further as to how the picture disappeared?"

"No, but I have hopes."

"Ah! And on what are they based?" The detective leaned forward quickly.

"My smartest reporter is now at the Louvre engaged on the case."

"Ha, ha, ha!" The Inspector threw his head back, smacked his knee and roared with laughter.

"Truly, M'sieur Poiret, you are admirable. Ah, *c'est épatant!* Your smartest reporter at the Louvre!" And he roared again, the tears coming into his eyes. He rose from his chair still laughing.

"Au 'voir, M'sieur Poiret. When your reporter has learned something I trust you will let me know. But I have no doubt we shall meet again in any case." And he was gone.

Antoine sat back, and laughed in his turn. The door opened again, and Bourdot and Morissot came in. A

cigarette drooped in Morissot's lips. Bourdot seemed a little less shiny than usual. They both, indeed, were very depressed.

"You seem extremely gay this morning," said the latter peevishly. "I only hope you can see a way out of this horrid mess. By the way, who was that we met on the stairs? He was chuckling too."

"That was Inspector Sauvage, of the Sûreté."

"Ah! Then it is the beginning of the end," cried Bourdot dramatically. "The police are on our backs already."

"Not at all. Do you know whom I have got in there?" whispered Antoine. He pointed to the door behind him.

"In my room? No! Whom?"

"The man who stole *La Douloureuse!*"

"*Saperlipopette!*" shouted Bourdot, and made one bound for the door. Even Morissot looked startled.

V

As Bourdot bounded into the room, with Morissot behind him and Antoine in the rear, the tall man with the beard jumped to his feet with an expression of terror and backed away.

"And so you are the man who stole *La Douloureuse?*" said Bourdot in a voice that quivered with excitement.

"Who told you that? Who are you?" cried the stranger hoarsely. He stood back against the wall, in his shirt sleeves, a pencil held as though it were a dagger to defend himself, his face pale and distraught.

"Who told me? Why, this gentleman, M. Poiret, of course." Bourdot turned round and pointed at Antoine. "Is it not so? Did you not steal *La Douloureuse?*"

"Then you have betrayed me! These are detectives!"

"Not at all," said Antoine smoothly. "Have no fear. These gentlemen are my co-directors." The look of fear left the features of the stranger. He let out a long breath of relief.

"I told them who was in here and . . ."

"But who told you that I had stolen *La Douloureuse?*"

"But, come now," Antoine smiled, an indulgent, quizzical smile. "Is it not so?"

For a moment the eyes of the stranger met his defiantly. Then the stranger's gaze dropped.

"*Oui. C'est vrai!* I stole *La Douloureuse!* Voila! At last I have told somebody." He moved to a chair and sank down into it, his elbows on his knees, looking down on the floor.

There was a silence in the room. The three Directors looked at each other. On Antoine's face there was a touch of triumph. Bourdot took his right hand, Morissot the left. Quite silently they shook. Antoine felt that it was a great moment.

The silence continued. Antoine bent down and spoke softly to the bent figure.

"*Dites donc, mon ami.* You have something more to tell us. Is it not so?"

The man looked up. His face was haggard.

"Yes, if you wish. I will tell you everything. I must tell somebody. But send for some absinthe—Pernod. I must have a drink."

Antoine made a sign, and Morissot disappeared. In a little while he came back with Jean, who carried a tray bearing a glass, water, sugar and a large bottle filled with a greenish fluid.

"See that we are disturbed on no account whatever," said Antoine as Jean went out. He went to the door and turned the key.

VI

"My name is Pierre Xavier François Marie Lemaire."

The stranger sat well back in Bourdot's easy chair. To his right hand was a large glass of the pearly green liquid, which he stirred with care. He took a long pull at it, and his eyes brightened.

"By profession I am a painter. By inclination I am, as you see, a drinker of absinthe. No doubt it accounts for much.

"I stole *La Douloureuse* six months ago. Why did I steal it, you may ask? I hardly know myself. But the idea came into my head, and became an obsession. I knew I should know no peace until I satisfied it. Since satisfying it I have known torments.

"At that time I was copying old masters in the Louvre for a well-known art dealer. The idea of stealing the most valuable picture in the world came to me one afternoon when I was alone in a particular gallery where it hung. It would have been quite possible at that moment to put the picture frame and all under my cloak and walk off with it. But I knew that discovery of the theft would come almost immediately, and that suspicion must almost certainly fall on me as a frequenter of that section of the Louvre. I determined then, to make a copy of the masterpiece and at a convenient moment to make the substitution.

"To do this I disguised myself by the simple method of shaving off my beard and moustache and cutting my hair. I did not desire that the painter seen copying *La Douloureuse* should be identified with the painter who had already done so much work there.

"I worked on the copy for three weeks. Many tourists admired my painting. I smiled to myself when

I heard people say that they would as soon have it as the original.

"In quiet moments I had taken the most careful measurements and examined how the masterpiece was fastened in. I am fairly expert in framing pictures. I knew exactly the habits of the attendants. I also arranged my easel so as to give me cover behind which I could work, and chose a moment shortly after the luncheon hour, when I judged that I should have at least a quarter of an hour in which to effect the exchange. As a matter of fact a *gardien* appeared at the end of the gallery while I was at work, but knowing me so well now as the copier of the masterpiece he turned away.

"The rest was easy. I packed up my easel, left it in the usual way, and came away with the masterpiece under my coat. Had I been challenged in any way I should, of course, have said that the picture I was taking away was my finished work.

"I took the masterpiece to my studio. Then for some weeks I remained practically a prisoner, only going out occasionally at night, waiting for my beard and hair to grow again.

"My only companion was *La Douloureuse*. Messieurs, I gloated over that masterpiece. I thought of its wonderful history; of the great artist who had painted it centuries ago, of the Kings who had intrigued for it. And yet, though I had the most precious, the most valuable painting in all the world in my humble studio, I was not happy. On the contrary I was extremely miserable.

"There was little fear of discovery. Yet all the same I trembled at every footstep on the stairs. The time came when I felt that I must get rid of *La Douloureuse* at all costs. But how? I had not the courage to try to put it back. I felt that this time I

should certainly have been discovered. I should have been laughed at if I had told the truth, and no doubt imprisoned for many years for trying to steal my own copy. I should not so much have minded the imprisonment, but the irony, Messieurs, would have killed me.

"Originally I had the vague idea that after I had feasted myself in leisurely contemplation of the masterpiece I might sell it for an immense sum. But now, how to find a purchaser? There was the extreme danger of approaching anybody on such a matter. And apart from that, who would believe that I really possessed the masterpiece?

"There came one occasion, indeed, when I thought I was in touch with a purchaser. It was in a night café at Montmartre, where I had gone as distraction from the nightmare that hung over me. There was a man there, an American the waiter told me, who was spending money so fast I felt sure he must be a millionaire. Feeling desperate—I was also extremely short of money at this time—I approached him. With much difficulty I made him understand of what it was that I spoke. At last he told me he had never heard of the picture. Never heard of *La Douloureuse!* I left him in anger. I would not have sold the picture to such a man for the Bank of France. And as it proved he was not a millionaire, for he could not settle his bill.

"So my life for the past six months has gone on—more wretched and more desperate with every day. But I have not told you the most singular and terrible thing of all. You know the mocking, melancholy smile of the masterpiece—the world, with the exception of that American, knows it. There came a time when it seemed meant only for me, that evil smile. She seemed to be mocking at my misery, to be rejoicing in my terrible dilemma. At last I came to hate that woman with all

my being, to loathe her so that it was with difficulty I restrained myself from destroying her. In the end I hid her away. I have not seen *La Douloureuse* for months.

"I drank more and more of this." He pointed to the absinthe. "You know what that means. I have often thought of suicide, and leaving a letter to the nation to explain. Then no doubt I should have been believed. Two days ago I saw the startling announcement in *La Lumière*. You can imagine my amazement. I was confounded. You said that the picture had been sold in America. That puzzled me, but I thought perhaps it might have been written purposely for some reason I am ignorant of. I thought over the matter for two whole days, until I felt my reason would go. How had my secret been divined? Did the police suspect me? At last I could support it no longer. I came here this morning. Now you know all."

He leaned back and closed his eyes apparently exhausted. There was silence in the room. At last Lemaire spoke again in a tired voice:

"I have told you everything. Now one question. How did you find out that *La Douloureuse* had been stolen?"

"I am sorry, my friend, but it is impossible to tell you that yet," said Antoine.

"But do the police know? Am I suspected?"

"The police know nothing. We four are the only people in the world who know how *La Douloureuse* was stolen. But tell me, where is the picture now?"

"It is still in my studio. I throw myself on your mercy. I am not a criminal. I stole that picture—why I don't know. My only desire for long past has been to get rid of it. Can you extricate me from this terrible dilemma?"

"At least I can promise you this: we will do our very best," said Antoine.

The telephone on Bourdot's desk tinkled. Antoine picked up the receiver.

"Who is that?" asked a voice.

"*C'est moi,* Antoine Poiret."

"Ah! This is Durand speaking. I thought I had better ring up and tell you. There is a detective from the Sûreté watching the office door. He is in a taxicab just opposite the Boulevard entrance."

"*Tonnerre!* Who is it—Sauvage?"

"No, his right-hand man, Pince."

"A sinister name," said Antoine. "Come in, and pretend you have seen nothing."

VII

ANTOINE's face showed that he had news. There was a sensation when he imparted it.

"Then they have seen me come here—they suspect me already," cried Lemaire, his face working with fright.

"No, it is not that." Antoine detailed the visit paid by Sauvage. "He was very amused when he departed, but he has taken all precautions, the rascal. It is me he is having watched, and the office generally, of course. Everybody connected with this place is for the time being under suspicion."

"What's to be done?" cried Bourdot. Even Morissot looked anxious.

Antoine stroked his beard for a moment.

"What I propose is this. Lemaire must be shielded at all costs. So far he is in no way suspected in connection with the affair. As for us, nobody really thinks we have had anything to do with stealing the master-

piece. We are merely suspected of knowing who did. Now, thanks to M. Lemaire, we do know. We also know where the picture is. We must so arrange that, if we find the picture and deliver it intact, no questions will be asked."

"But how? How are we to manage the police?"

"Binot-Varillon. There is our trump card. If he is properly nursed I think we may save the situation. . . . But I think I hear Durand." He unlocked the door and went into his own room.

Durand had just entered.

"The picture is still there, with a big crowd round it, all discussing feverishly whether it is the original or not," he reported.

"But, about this detective, Pince," said Antoine. "Does he know you, and what you do?"

"Yes, I have met him several times. That was why I telephoned first, so that I could let you know before I came into the office."

"Excellent, my young friend. Listen! Your wish is gratified. You shall be in the great mystery. In there I have a stranger. He wears a soft felt hat—not at all like the nice new one you have on—a faded velveteen jacket, and a flowing tie. You are going to make up a parcel of just about the size of the picture you have just seen at the Louvre. Pince, who has seen you come in as you always are, will see you go out in a sort of disguise, carrying a parcel of an intriguing size. I hope you will be able to lead Monsieur Pince a dance. Don't spare him. Act as suspiciously as you can. *Tenez!* call in at one of the big hotels, any one, and ask if Monsieur Smitt, or some such name, the famous American millionaire, has arrived. That will make him think. But wait, that is not all. . . ."

Antoine went into the inner room where the three

were still sitting. He outlined the situation, begged the painter to divest himself of hat, coat and tie, and returned with the garments to Durand.

"Here are the things to put on. You can make up the parcel yourself. Make it look important—plenty of cord and sealing wax. You will keep Pince as busy as you can, and as long as you can. And if you have anything to report, ring up."

"*C'est compris!*" said Durand simply. He looked at the hat of the painter with a little expression of distaste, and then bravely put it on, following it with the velveteen coat and flowing artist's tie.

"Splendid," said Antoine, picking up the clothes Durand had discarded. "Your trousers are a little too respectable, but if you rub that perfect shine off your boots you will do. And now, my young friend, the parcel. Let me know when it is prepared and you are ready to depart."

Antoine returned to his friends and handed Durand's garments to Lemaire.

"Would you be good enough to put these on?" he said. "It is well that for a time you should not look like a painter." He lit a cigarette and waited while Lemaire made the change.

A few minutes later there was a knock at the door. Antoine went out and found Durand ready with an imposing parcel.

"It will do. Now *en avant!* I will watch at the window to see if Pince follows."

He saw Durand arrive on the pavement, look quickly up and down the boulevard in a cautious manner, and walk away. A head popped out of the window of a taxicab opposite, and looked after Durand. Then the owner of it jumped out, spoke rapidly to the driver, who nodded several times, and followed after Durand.

"So," said Antoine softly. "There is still the chauffeur."

He returned to the other room, and gave an outline of what he had done.

"It sounds very complicated," said Bourdot mournfully. "Let's hope it will work out all right. And now what do we do?"

"Now we lunch," said Antoine. "You, Morissot, take M. Lemaire round to *La Bonne Bière*. Bourdot and I will follow after, separately. The chauffeur shall have an opportunity of seeing the leading members of the staff of *La Lumière*."

* * * * * *

Over luncheon Antoine elaborated his plan of campaign.

"You, Bourdot, I want you to get in touch with Binot-Varillon so that at any time this evening we shall be able to telephone him and get him at a moment's notice. And you, Morissot?"

"I have a very important political article to write to-day," he answered.

"The Government?"

"You have said it."

"Ah, the poor Government! . . . Well, gentlemen, on going out of here we will chat for a few moments in a light-hearted way and then go off in various directions. I think our chief spy is shaken off, but we will take no chances. I shall go to Lemaire's for the picture myself, but shall wait until it is dark. You, Lemaire, I suggest, should go home and wait there with a tranquil mind until I come to your studio this evening, between eight-thirty and nine o'clock. I shall take a promenade in the Champs Elysées—simply that—and think over the situation. We all meet in the office between nine and ten to-night. And then—we shall see.

VIII

As Pince followed Durand along the boulevard he kept his eyes open in more directions than one. Hunter and hunted had been walking along for some ten minutes when, at the corner of the Place de l'Opéra the detective made a signal to a well-built man, also in dark clothes and a bowler hat, who was apparently standing there aimlessly. This individual came up to and greeted Pince casually, and they walked along together for a few hundred yards, Pince talking rapidly all the time. Then he abruptly turned on his heel, and walked briskly back towards the offices of *La Lumière*, leaving the other man to follow Durand.

Arrived again at the office he had a short conversation with the driver of the taxicab, and immediately went to the nearest telephone and held counsel with Inspector Sauvage, telling him what had happened.

"This Durand may be a blind," said the Inspector, "and on the other hand he may not. Anyhow, you have a good man following him. Pasquier will see how much there is in him. But the fact that they sent a man out with a parcel at all makes me more suspicious than ever. I think we shall find our affair in the offices of *La Lumière*. The point is to concentrate on this man Poiret. He is the key to the situation." And the Inspector described him carefully.

"Good," said Pince. "He is having lunch with the others in a little café near the office now. I will see that he does not get out of my sight."

Pince next made for the quiet street in which the *Café de la Bonne Bière* was situated. He noticed with satisfaction that there was a little wine bar immediately opposite, and there, ordering a drink, he took up his watch.

IX

At about half-past eight Antoine descended from a taxicab in the Rue de la Môme, Montmartre, entered the dark doorway of No. 17, and without bothering to salute the concierge mounted a dingy flight of stairs up to the fifth floor. He knocked at the door, and in a few moments it was opened by Lemaire.

"Ah, how good it is to see you," exclaimed the painter. "It has not been gay here alone with my thoughts. Is everything all right?"

"I think so. I have watched most carefully all day, but I feel sure I have not been shadowed. But there was a curious message from Durand during the afternoon, all the same. He said that he was being followed about not by Pince but by another man who took his place. Perhaps it only means that Pince grew tired of the affair and deputed the work to another."

"Let us hope so," said the painter. But his mouth twitched nervously.

"Now, the picture!" said Antoine. Their talk had taken place in a small outer hall, innocent of furniture or decoration. Lemaire now pushed open a door and led Antoine into a very large room with a big skylight. An easel and a few plaster casts showed that it was the place where the painter worked. A bed in a corner suggested that it was the place where he also slept.

An oil lamp and two candles lit the room faintly. Lemaire locked the door behind them and then going to his bed lifted up the mattress. From this he took a flat parcel about two feet square wrapped in oilcloth. He took off the outer wrapper, then several inner wrappings of soft paper and suddenly held out the picture to Antoine.

"Bigre!" exclaimed Antoine.

He felt a certain emotion in taking it. This was the most famous, the most valuable picture in the world. There were men who, were they offered the privilege by the Government of France, would gladly give millions for it. And yet, tucked away here under Lemaire's mattress it was valueless, a mere square of painted wood. And so it might have lain for years but for Antoine's freakish decision to give Paris a spurious sensation.

"That is *La Douloureuse!*" said Lemaire. His voice quavered with emotion. "And God only knows how glad I shall be to rid myself of her."

Antoine looked at the melancholy face, bearing the mocking enigmatical smile which for centuries had been the admiration and despair of poets and painters without number.

"It seems a wicked face to me—the face of a she-devil," he said. "Brrrrh! I could not live with it for a week. My poor Lemaire, what your life here must have been, alone with her and your secret! Wrap her up again and we will go."

Lemaire obeyed. He had just finished when there came a loud knock on the outer door. The two men started and looked at each other. Lemaire was as pale as death. Like a flash he darted to his bed and hid the picture away again.

Antoine's heart beat fast in the silence that followed. Had the police then been following him after all? He had doubled all round Paris during the day, and only communicated with the office by telephone.

There came the faint sound of a voice from the outer door. Raising a warning finger to the scared painter Antoine silently opened the first door and listened.

Again came the voice wheezily through the keyhole: "*C'est moi*, Durand. Open quickly."

Antoine darted forward but stopped with his hand on the outer door. Durand! How should he be here? And that did not sound like his voice. He bent down and peeped through the keyhole. In the dim light of the landing he could just see the edge of a burly figure. It was Inspector Sauvage!

Trapped! Antoine's brain reeled with the shock. This was a pretty end to the greatest journalistic sensation of the century.

He staggered back into the studio, closing the door behind him. Lemaire there met him with a gaze of horror.

"What is it?" he gasped. "Not the police!"

Antoine nodded.

"Mon Dieu, mon Dieu!" groaned the unhappy painter, and buried his face in his hands. His legs shook. He seemed about to collapse. Antoine grasped him by the shoulders and shook him.

"No noise!" he hissed in a tense whisper. "All may not be lost. By the law of France they cannot force an entry until daylight. Pull yourself together. We are not beaten yet."

There came another knock at the door. It sounded like the crack of doom, and Antoine shook at the sound of it. An inspiration came to him. He went to the keyhole.

"Listen, Durand," he said. "The article is not written yet. He is busy on it now and must not be disturbed. Come back in an hour."

"*Bien*," came the voice, and there was the sound of footsteps on the stairs.

Antoine went back to the studio to find Lemaire stretched out on the bed, his face still in his hands, groaning softly like an injured man. As Antoine looked at him he felt utterly hopeless. His world

seemed to be tumbling about him. This was the end of *La Lumière*—as far as he was concerned. Bourdot and Morissot were right, then. He ought not to have gone so far. And yet he had so nearly succeeded!

A sudden rage came over him at the sight of the unnerved man on the bed. He sprang towards him and shook him again—savagely this time.

"Stop that noise, imbecile!" he hissed. "Get up, and let us see if there is possibly a way out of this. We have hours ahead of us before the police can come in."

Lemaire stood up, reeling like a drunken man. Antoine noticed a green bottle, with water and a glass, standing on a small table near the bed. He mixed an absinthe, added some sugar and brought it to the painter.

"Here, drink this. It is bad stuff, but it may do you good now."

Lemaire gulped it down.

"*Merci!*" he said huskily. "Some air. It is close." He walked to the window and opened it. Then on the instant he jumped back into the room, a look of wild hope and excitement on his face.

"That light over there, you see it," he whispered hoarsely. "It is a studio like this. A friend of mine, Godard, occupies it. Outside this window there is a broad ledge running right round to his studio. His staircase opens on to another street. If we can get there we may be saved. But we must be careful. It is a terrible drop down to the courtyard. Shall we risk it?"

"Shall we risk it!" cried Antoine happily. He made a dive for the bed and seized the picture again. "Now then! Softly as possible. We must go on our stomachs. They may be watching from below. Your friend Godard will have the surprise of his life."

X

Bourdot sat gloomily at his desk. There had been a great society function which he had missed, and he was now trying to describe the brilliant scene without having been there.

Morissot wandered into his room, smoking a cigarette and frowning.

"You look glum," said Bourdot.

"I feel it," returned the other. "And you—tell me. How do you like the look of things?"

"Not at all. The fact is, *mon cher*, he is going to land us in a pretty mess.

Morissot nodded.

"Half-past nine, and no news," Bourdot cried. "What do we announce for to-morrow? I wonder if the police have got him. And Durand! He has not turned up. Perhaps they've got him too. Ah, *quelle affaire!*" He threw out his arms with a gesture of despair. "If he fails in this it will kill the paper. But once he gets an idea in his head there is no restraining him. Think of his mad flight to Monte Carlo! But this! We have been fools! Juggling with the national treasures. . . ."

The telephone tinkled. Bourdot took up the receiver.

"Who is it?" came a hoarse and urgent voice.

"*C'est moi*, Bourdot."

"This is Antoine. All goes well. We have the picture and we have dodged Sauvage and Company. But the office is still watched. We cannot get in. You must make a diversion before the doorway. Go up to the Boulevards. Collect the first *camelot* you can, no matter what he does—an acrobat, anything. Give him twenty francs to do a performance before the door-

way—no matter what, so long as he shouts and collects a crowd. We will slip in behind the people. Quick!"

"But impossible," protested Bourdot. "I can't do a think like that."

"But, *mon ami*, it is urgent, vital!" came Antoine's voice, vibrating with intensity. "Everything crumbles if we do not do this. Quick, *mon ami!* Think of the paper!"

Bourdot dropped the receiver with a groan, explained the situation in a few frenzied and incoherent words to Morissot, put on his hat and rushed out. He had the presence of mind to go slowly at first so as not to excite suspicion. But well clear of the office he walked along at feverish speed, his eyes searching from side to side in search of someone who would get Antoine out of his dilemma, his breast raging at the undignified nature of the task thrust upon him.

Just near a well-lighted café he caught sight of a disreputable young man he knew well by sight. This individual made a precarious living by standing before the various cafés and—with the aid of a piece of felt which he twisted into the likeness of all sorts of headgear—giving imitations of various celebrities, from Napoleon downwards, to the accompaniment of surprising facial contortions and a ceaseless flow of "*boniment*," or nonsense. Bourdot pounced on the young man.

"Say then, would you like to earn twenty francs?"

The young man made a horrible grimace:

"What do you think!"

Bourdot hurriedly explained what he wanted.

"But the police," objected the young man.

"Peste!" exclaimed Bourdot. "You dodge them twenty times a night—and for a few odd sous. There is twenty francs for this. Here is ten on account. You

shall collect the rest to-morrow when I see you have done your job well."

"It's a bargain," said the imitator of Napoleon.

"Follow me at a short distance. A few moments after I have entered my office you begin with the *boniment.*" And he walked back to the office, turning round from time to time to see that the young man was following.

Once inside the doorway he bounded up the stairs, rushed to his room and opened the window. The voice of the young man arose on the instant, loud and raucous, rattling off the *boniment* he had recited ten thousand times. The two men inside the office peeped through the window. A few passers-by were collecting down below. The crowd grew slowly. Suddenly a policeman appeared from round the corner of the side street, and clapped his heavy hand on the young man's shoulder. The imitator of Napoleon gave a startled yelp, dodged active as a cat, and fled. People came running from all directions, crowding round the policeman. In a moment the pavement was impassable.

"That ought to do it," said Bourdot.

There was a noise in the outer office and Antoine burst in, hatless, disheveled, his hands black with the crawl round the roof, a parcel under his arm. Behind him was Lemaire, a wild look in his eyes.

"Splendid, Bourdot," gasped Antoine. "You see this parcel. It is *La Douloureuse!*" And he sank into a chair.

"To the devil with *La Douloureuse!*" cried Bourdot savagely. "What fantastic thing do we do next?"

"Binot-Varillon! Where is he? You have got him?"

"Not in my pocket. But I found out that he will be at home all the evening."

"Then telephone him, my good Bourdot. Say, if he

will be good enough to come here, we think we shall be able to let him have some news—some news from London say. But only on condition that he comes at once, and without saying a word to the police. Get that assurance from him first. We will go and wash. *Allons*, Lemaire."

XI

By the time the Minister of Fine Arts was announced Antoine felt a new man. Some cold meat and salad with a bottle of good wine from the café and a good cigar, which he was now puffing, had helped in the transformation. He received the Minister with unruffled mien and a smiling countenance.

M. Binot-Varillon bowed to the three Directors as he had done before.

"You have news, Messieurs," he said.

"We hope so," said Antoine pleasantly. He picked up a telegraph form from the table. "We have heard from London. We think it possible that the masterpiece may shortly be returned to its proper place. But there are conditions."

"And what are they?"

"That from this moment all action on the part of the police must cease. A certain high personage is concerned. I will be frank with you. It is a case of kleptomania on the part of a person of international importance. The scandal, if the truth came out, would be amazing. The terms conveyed to us in this cipher telegram are that if we can obtain a promise that the real facts are suppressed, the picture will be returned intact."

The Minister of Fine Arts frowned and seemed to be thinking hard.

"You ask me to tamper with the laws of France," he said at last. "I cannot undertake to do any such thing."

"Is it not a fact, *Monsieur le Ministre*, that in international affairs the law is not always regarded quite so scrupulously?" said Antoine winningly.

M. Binot-Varillon permitted himself to smile.

"A word in your ear," said Antoine mysteriously. He bent forward and whispered the name of an eminent British Cabinet Minister.

The Minister of Fine Arts opened his eyes with amazement.

"Mon Dieu, is it possible! Then when you said America in your original article you really meant London?"

Antoine nodded.

"I could see the Minister of Justice, of course. It is possible that something could be arranged." The Minister of Fine Arts pondered. "But then, there is something much more difficult—the public. They know the picture has been stolen. It is the talk of all Paris—of all France. What are they to be told?"

"That is the second condition I desire to put before you," said Antoine suavely. "The public can be told something—and we desire that *La Lumière* shall be the medium through which it hears. We can easily fabricate a story which will appear plausible enough. I have already thought of an idea. We can say that a poor devil of an artist, half demented by absinthe, was seduced by the wonderful picture, made a copy of it, stole the original, and lived with the treasure, until his mind gave way under the strain of the secret. We can describe the astuteness of the Ministry of Fine Arts and the police in tracking him down—and say that this poor beggar is under medical care, and that with the best

attention he may yet possibly recover. It may not be the truth—but Paris will believe it. And there will not be the same censure for the Ministry of Fine Arts as would have been the case had it been a mere robbery for the sake of a great sum of money. Paris will say 'Poor devil'—and let it go at that."

"It is extremely irregular," sighed M. Binot-Varillon, "but it is a possible way out. I will see what can be done. Something indeed must be done! My life this last two days has been a most unenviable one."

"And we have your assurance—first that this conversation is for the present a secret between ourselves, and secondly that you will see to it we are no longer troubled by the police. After all, we are merely agents, trying to do our best for France and you."

"The first I promise. As to the second—I think I can promise it. And I will go off to the Prefecture at once."

"My friends," said Antoine when the door had closed behind the unhappy Minister, "there is a greater in this world than even Inspector Sauvage—and that is the Prefect of Police."

"Mon cher Antoine," exclaimed Bourdot, his voice husky with emotion. "In your greater moments you have, *vraiment*, a touch of genius."

"*Mon cher ami*," said Morissot solemnly. And each taking a hand of the senior Director shook it solemnly.

"I think all will be well," said Antoine modestly. "And this poor Lemaire . . . we must keep an eye on him. . . . I have taken a fancy to the poor devil. Do you know what he whispered to me when we were crawling along that roof? 'Mon Dieu, I've forgotten Durand's hat!'"

XII

The publication four days later of the full story of the theft and recovery of *La Douloureuse* was a stunning blow for the rest of journalistic Paris. For *La Lumière* it was a triumph of the first magnitude. The story of the demented artist who stole the most valuable picture in existence reverberated not only throughout France but all over the civilized world.

But there was an interesting little scene in the offices of *La Lumière* to which no publicity was given.

The three Directors, immaculate and impressive, stood on one side of Antoine's long table. On the other side stood the Minister of Fine Arts, the Prefect of Police, a number of minor officials—and Inspector Sauvage.

The great masterpiece, Antoine said, had arrived from London overnight in the hands of a trusty messenger. With a fine gesture he turned to the safe behind him, opened it and took out the precious panel, handing it to M. Binot-Varillon. Amidst great excitement it was examined and an expert from the Louvre pronounced it to be the veritable masterpiece known as *La Douloureuse.* The Minister of Fine Arts, a prey to considerable emotion, made a little speech suitable to the occasion, saying that France owed a great deal to *La Lumière,* and its directors. Then, with many bows, congratulations and handshakes the group broke up.

The last to leave was Inspector Sauvage. As he reached the door he turned round, looked Antoine in the eyes, put a finger to his nose with a most expressive gesture and solemnly winked.

There was a considerable fuss in political circles but that was only to be expected. Shortly afterwards M. Binot-Varillon resigned his office. And at about the same time there appeared in Antoine's buttonhole the narrow red ribbon of a most highly prized decoration.

CHAPTER III

THE KING OF PARIS

I

Monsieur Auguste Morissot, Political Director of *La Lumière*, was sitting in his office late one evening writing a furious attack on the reigning Government.

"Never in the history of the Third Republic has such a spiritless, invertebrate gang of nondescripts . . ." he had begun—when suddenly the electric light went out.

"Peste!" he exclaimed. "Who has done that?"

He waited in the darkness, expecting momentarily that the light would come on again. But the darkness continued. Furious, he rang his bell. Then, looking through the window, he noticed that the lights on the Boulevard were also extinguished. At the same moment there were sounds of running feet in the corridors of the office, and a cry went up for candles.

"Ten thousand devils!" growled Morissot. "It must be that scoundrel of a Merlou again. What a country!" Biting, scathing sentences revolved in his brain, but he could not put them down to the account of the Government as he was still in darkness.

In a few moments faint lights twinkled here and there. On the terrace of the big café opposite, Morissot could see waiters running about, with candles, stuck hurriedly into the necks of bottles.

Morissot waited impatiently, beating a tattoo on the

desk with his fingers. But he remained in darkness. "*A moi*—candles!" he roared. But still nobody came to his rescue.

"Ah, but this is insupportable!" he cried, and dashing out into the passage, burst into the room of Antoine.

The Business Director of the journal was sitting at his desk reading something by the light of a solitary candle. He looked up at Morissot's furious entrance.

"Here am I in the midst of a most important article—and the lights go out!" cried the man of politics. "It is a scandal!"

"It's that *cochon* Merlou again," said Antoine. "He has been quiet for a little while, but evidently he is at it again. Candles have been sent for."

"But consider, *mon ami*," cried Morissot. "My train of thought is interrupted. My argument has gone out of my head. And all because of a pestilential labor leader who turns out the lights of Paris whenever he feels like it, and then sits and laughs at us. *Ciel.* I could shoot him!"

"I wish you would," said Antoine.

"But what a Government!" fumed Morissot, and returned to his room.

Candles arrived, and in a few minutes the office was at work again. An hour later the lights came on once more. With their advent Bourdot arrived in the office. He was laboring under great excitement and indignation.

"Consider," he announced. "A gala performance at the Opera! The King and Queen of Bulmania are there, the President too and the élite of Paris. And suddenly, in the midst of 'Thaïs' the lights go out. There was nearly a panic. The place was emptied with the greatest difficulty and danger. Women were fainting. There were riots in the cloak-rooms. It was grotesque! When is this man going to be suppressed?"

"I wish I could tell you," said Antoine.

Bourdot also retired to do his writing. He left Antoine thinking very hard.

II

THE tyranny of Merlou had grown with success. Starting modestly with a little affair in a factory on the outskirts of Paris, Merlou had won handsomely, and obtained a raise of wages on the spot for the electricians who had come out on strike at his bidding. His ambition and daring had grown by leaps and bounds. And now he had done the most audacious thing of all—plunged Paris into darkness on a night when a foreign Monarch and his Queen were being entertained at a gala performance at the Opera by the President of the Republic.

At first Paris had taken the Merlou adventures in good part. Once the first shock was over it had become rather good fun to finish dinner by candlelight. The restaurants and cafés began to accumulate a stock of lamps and candles, and the moment the electric current failed the waiters dashed about with twinkling lights stuck in bottles, and the customers laughed and joked as they sipped their coffee. This Merlou was an amusing rogue, and the Boulevards had a certain charm by candlelight—so it had become the fashion to say.

But this latest escapade was different. An honored guest of the nation had been insulted. And there were whispers that the King of Bulmania had been very much upset. Semi-autocratic monarchs of troublous little States do not like to be suddenly plunged into darkness. The night holds terrors for the wearers of some crowns. And in the Presidential box the King's

military attaché had been kept busy striking matches while the President of the French Republic, consumed by anger and mortification, assured his royal guest that the *contretemps* was merely due to the machinations of a certain individual called Merlou.

"If Merlou lived in Bulmania he would suddenly disappear," the King was reported to have said.

Of all the articles on the incident which appeared in the press of the capital next morning none was so bitter and so scathing as Morissot's in *La Lumière*. He flayed the Government alive, and then danced on its tender corpse.

Since that little affair of *La Douloureuse* the paper had become quite a power in Paris. Morissot had powerful politicians in his pocket; Bourdot wielded great influence in the most select social circles; Antoine found himself at the head of a concern which increased in importance with every month that passed.

Antoine believed in himself. His success in the affair of "*La Douloureuse*," and the happy results that followed from it, had given him a calm confidence in whatever he undertook. He had been lucky, no doubt. But then if one is lucky why not take every advantage of it? His thoughts now turned to Merlou. It would be an admirable thing to wipe out this pestilential syndicalist. And if it could be done by ridicule—how Paris would enjoy the fun!

He called in Durand to consult him.

"What do you know about Merlou?" he said.

"Not a great deal," replied the crime investigator. "But his followers swear by him. He has a jolly way with him, and so far he has always been successful. Many of them are delighted at the fright he gave to the King of Bulmania. . . . Apart from that he loves a good dinner, has a keen eye for the ladies—there are

stories of amorous adventures—and is fond of the good things of life generally. He enjoys a good laugh and loves to be called the King of Paris."

"What is he after?"

"Money."

"Ah! Listen, Durand. You must cultivate this Merlou. I have a plan. I wish to depose the King of Paris. Leave everything else, and stick to him. You can begin now."

"*Entendu!*" said Durand, and went out, delighted with his mission. Left to himself Antoine tugged his little beard thoughtfully. Money and a gay life! These ought to be vulnerable points of attack in the man who not only preached industrial revolution, but practiced it on every possible occasion.

It was intolerable that such an individual should have Paris at his mercy at any moment he wished. At a moment when a visiting King and Queen were being soothed by the agitated President, and panic was hovering in the vast dark auditorium of the Opera, Merlou was sitting in a little café not a hundred yards away, surrounded by half a dozen of his cronies, toasting the coming Revolution in excellent red wine, and playing cards by the light of a plentiful supply of candles thoughtfully provided in advance. So much Paris knew next day, and it made the good bourgeois foam at the mouth. This was going much beyond a joke.

So far Authority had seemed powerless. It was feared indeed in the highest circles, that there was a good deal more behind Merlou's bonhomie and audacity than most people imagined. There had been sullen mutterings in the labor world for a long time past. The General Strike was being preached, and Merlou was only one of many in the movement, and though the best known to the public was not necessarily the most power-

ful. It was all very well for Morissot and his kind to rage and fume, but Authority did not quite yet know where to tread. Merlou ordered and his men followed. The consequences of sitting heavily on Merlou at this stage might be very serious.

But Antoine did not reason like this. His weapons were not to be armed force, but something much more subtle. He had marked down his prey, and hoped that it might be bad for Merlou and good for Paris and *La Lumière*. And what more congenial task could be undertaken by a newspaper which was known to the world as "The Light" than the overthrowing of a man who was constantly plunging his kind into darkness?

III

Durand, charged with his high mission, walked blithely along the Boulevard. This was the sort of thing he delighted in. A shocking murder at La Villette, interviews with the concierge and the lady next door, a description of the room where the tragedy took place—that sort of thing was all very well in its way. But this was quite different. It needed talents of no mean order—diplomacy, tact and *savoir faire*—and Durand flattered himself he had these.

And now how to begin. He had read all the morning papers very carefully. The scene of Merlou sitting in his favorite café, chuckling while Paris groped in the darkness, came into his mind. That might be an excellent place to begin. It was lunch time. He would go there.

The Café-Restaurant de l'Escalier Tournant lay in a quiet side street just off the busy Rue de Lafayette. It was a modest but clean and tidy establishment, and Durand as he pushed open the door found about a dozen

people there, eating lunch with that keen enjoyment and strict attention to the business in hand which is so universal and striking a feature of Paris at the midday hour. He sat down at a vacant table, and gave his order to one of the two waiters.

Durand kept his eyes and ears well open. Madame, placid and expressionless as the Sphinx, sat at the cash desk, handing out checks to the waiters, pouring out aperitifs and liqueurs, keeping an unwinking eye on the machinery of an establishment which to her was all that mattered in the world. A portly man, with curled black moustaches, appeared behind the counter and exchanged a brief word with Madame. The proprietor. He might be well worth cultivating, decided Durand.

Now and again from the various people lunching he caught snatches of conversation referring to the affair of the night before, and Merlou's name was generally greeted with a laugh, although occasionally came an expression of indignation at the idea of what might have happened at the Opera.

The door opened and a woman came in. She looked round at the now crowded room, hesitated, and finally came up to Durand's table, at which he was sitting alone.

"*Vous permettez*, Monsieur?" she said.

"But certainly, Madame."

She sat down with a smile of thanks. She was a handsome woman, in the very early thirties, with dark, fierce eyes. Durand was not long in noticing that she seemed very much on the alert, as if expecting or hoping to see someone she was in search of, and every time the door opened to let in a newcomer she turned sharply round. There was an air of suppressed excitement about her which suggested that the meeting might be a stormy one. Durand became interested.

A chance encounter with the cruet, and conversation was opened. The incidents of the night before were mentioned.

"He is an extraordinary man, this Merlou," said Durand.

"Extraordinary! He is more than that. He is a rogue, Monsieur." The vehemence of her tones was not lost on him.

"You know him possibly, this King of Paris?"

"Know him! Alas! I know him only too well." Her eyes flashed. "I am one of his victims, Monsieur. His path is strewn with many. I am one of the latest. I was told that he might be here to-day. It is to see him, if possible, that I have come."

Durand's heart bounded.

"Then I gather," he insinuated, "that—if I dare to say so—in spite of Madame's undoubted charms, he will not be too pleased to see you."

She laughed grimly, and Durand decided that she was not a woman to be crossed lightly.

"*Ma foi, non!* He will not be at all pleased to see me. Listen, Monsieur. You are sympathetic. I should like to tell you. My name is Eugenie Vigneau. I am a widow. A few months ago I met this traitor Merlou. He paid instant court to me—oh, but he was a fluent rascal! I am a woman, Monsieur. *Que voulez vous?* We are to be married. I was to abandon the little dressmaker's business which I had. He told me of his schemes—oh, but he can talk dazzingly! He was to be one of the leaders in a new world. It was he, and such men as he, who would have power and wealth. My head was turned. He painted to me the great place I should occupy with him. I should be Queen of Paris, he said. And then—one day I discovered that he had a wife, a weak, timid creature he had

abandoned long ago! I taxed him with it, and he denied it. But he never came again, and he went away owing me three thousand francs, which he had borrowed to finance his wonderful schemes. I waited a week, expecting to see him every day, hoping that after all I had not been deceived. I called at the little hotel where he had been living. He had left. Then I knew that indeed he was a rogue. When the lights went out last night I knew that he was active again. A friend pointed out to me a passage in a newspaper which said that he frequented this café. And here I am, hoping to see him.

"There, Monsieur, I have told you everything. I do not quite know why: but I expect you to respect my confidence."

"Indeed, Madame, you may be sure of that. But what, may I ask, should you do to this Merlou if you saw him?"

Her firm mouth tightened into a straight line and her eyes flashed dangerously.

"I would show him, Monsieur, that he cannot trifle with a woman such as I. I should box his ears soundly in public—the more people the better. I should pull his hair, perhaps. He is a coward at heart, this King of Paris—I know it. I remember his face when I taxed him with the truth. The smile, the joviality all went. He trembled. . . . And it would not do, Monsieur, for this tyrant who has set himself up above Paris to be so treated in public. He would die instantly, of chagrin and ridicule."

"True, Madame, I am sure you are right." Durand was thinking furiously, staring before him. As he looked the door opened, and a well-built, jovial, florid man, with carefully trimmed moustache and beard, and hair that curled luxuriantly from beneath a wide felt

hat, entered the café. It was none other than Merlou, and he looked the picture of happiness and self-satisfaction. Fascinated, Durand stared, wondering what would happen next. But at that moment, through the mirrors that paneled the walls, the King of Paris caught sight of Durand's vis-à-vis. Instantly his face changed. The smile fell from it. A touch of pallor crept into the healthy cheeks, and there was alarm in his eye. Abruptly backing out again he closed the door and was gone.

"But what is it, Monsieur? You look startled." Durand's new acquaintance turned round swiftly, but too late. The door had just closed again on the alarmed Merlou.

"Listen, Madame. If I tell you something important, something startling even, will you give me your promise to keep calm?"

"Assuredly. But what is it?"

"And you promise not to dash away at once from this table, and leave me here?"

"But, Monsieur, quickly! What can it be?"

"A few moments ago I looked startled, you said. I had cause. Merlou came in at the door. He saw you through the mirrors, his face blanched, and he fled. No, do not jump up! He is far away, already, probably speeding in a taxicab."

"But, Mon Dieu, Monsieur, why did you not tell me?" The black eyes of Eugenie gleamed. "I came here to see him, and you let him go. It is wicked, cruel!"

"Calm yourself, Madame, I pray. I did it for the best. I have a better idea than yours. Your revenge shall be even more complete . . . We will talk it over now. Will Madame take a liqueur with her coffee?"

IV

ANTOINE was lavish in his praise when he received the report of his lieutenant.

"*Epatant, mon bon* Durand," he said, "Here we have something to work on. This colossus has feet of clay—and her name is Eugenie. No doubt there are others, but I think she will serve our purpose. What luck, eh? You could not possibly have done better."

"She was very annoyed at first," said Durand, who was extremely pleased with himself. "But I soon brought her round to my point of view. And now she is content to wait, so that his downfall may be all the greater. You have a plan?"

"Yes and no. Vaguely—I see something coming. Have no fear. We shall have him, in good time. There is no great hurry. No doubt he will show us the way. His head is getting larger and larger. Perhaps he will do something foolish soon. Keep an eye on him. It is a congenial task—eh, Durand? *Tenez!* Try one of these cigars. They are good."

And Durand went out to continue his mission, the proudest and happiest young man in Paris.

The storm in the Press caused by Merlou's impudent and audacious exploit raged for a few days and then, as is the way with these things, died down. The King of Bulmania and his Queen had departed, and happily no more untoward incidents had marked their visit. Merlou relapsed into quietude, and the affair seemed to be over. Paris forgot all about the scene at the Opera, and was deeply interested in a crime of love and passion which had just occurred in the fashionable quarter of the Etoile.

But there were those who mistrusted this apparent

calm, and indeed seemed to hear beneath it an insistent and sinister rumble of impending trouble. Strikes, small affairs, but straws to show which way the wind was blowing, were breaking out all over Paris, and on the slightest pretexts. The bakers, the builders, the chimney-sweeps, the railway men—all men and all trades, even the barbers, were restive. And so was the Government.

Morissot knew that.

"I tell you," he said to Antoine, "they've got the jumps. That Merlou business frightened them. Suppose there had been a catastrophe at the Opera! I know that one or two members of the Cabinet nearly resigned because Merlou was not clapped into prison at once. But the majority persuaded them to stop on. The fat rogue, it seems, has really got a very strong following in all sections of the labor world, and the Government were afraid of what might happen if they dealt with him too strongly. And they are afraid of making him too important. Mon Dieu, what men! . . . You saw my article this morning?"

"Did I not!"

"You thought it too strong?"

Antoine laughed.

"*Mon cher* Morissot, we hardly expect milk and water from you."

"Admirable! Milk and water—*café au lait*. There is too much of it elsewhere, eh? We want strong beverages. It would do our Cabinet Ministers good to take a course of cognac and sulphuric acid. What do you say?"

"But why, since you supply it for them every morning in *La Lumière*?"

"True!" said Morissot, and went away chuckling.

He came back a moment later.

"This man Merlou, I propose to flay him in to-morrow's paper," he announced simply.

"No, leave him alone," said Antoine. "I agree with the Government there. Just at present he desires nothing better. You would be playing his game. Leave him to me. I have other plans for him."

"As you wish. I can find something else. I will go and listen to the debate at the Chamber of Deputies. There will be material enough there, Heaven knows."

And Morissot departed to look for political scalps.

Bourdot also had his little word to say on the aspect of affairs.

"Are things as threatening as they seem?" he asked.

"I hardly know," said Antoine. "What do the Duchesses think of it?"

Bourdot twirled his moustache. He liked this sort of question.

"Frankly, there is some apprehension. I was talking to the Marquise de St. Colombe only yesterday. 'My dear Bourdot,' she said, 'what do you make of the situation? Why is this man Merlou not transported or sent to the guillotine?' Her ideas, of course, are not quite ours. She lives in the *ancien régime* . . . I told her we could hardly do that sort of thing nowadays. '*Ma chère Marquise,*' I said, 'you must understand that nowadays the working classes' . . ."

The telephone bell rang.

"Excuse me," said Antoine . . . "Ah, is that you Durand? Yes, go on . . . Good . . . Yes, it should be interesting. I will meet you there to-night, then, at eleven o'clock."

"What is happening?" asked Bourdot. "Another mad escapade. You must be careful, *mon cher* Antoine. That ardent temperament of yours will lead

you into trouble yet. No more trials of strength with the police?"

Antoine laughed.

"Not this time. I have merely set Durand on to watch Merlou these last few days. He is living a very gay life, it seems. I think it will be interesting to see him at it."

V

THE *Lapin Sauté* was one of the most glittering, most expensive and most popular of the Montmartre night resorts. When Antoine and Durand entered it shortly after eleven o'clock the café was already well filled, and a number of couples were dancing in the center of the large room to the strains from a red-coated Tsigane orchestra.

Antoine secured a table in a corner from which the whole of the room could be seen, and ordered champagne. Champagne was "*obligatoire*" at the *Lapin Sauté*.

"And now tell me all about this mountebank," said Antoine. "What has he been doing?"

"Chiefly lunching well, dining well and smoking expensive cigars," said Durand. "But something big is preparing. I managed to strike up an acquaintance with the proprietor of the café where I met Eugenie, and he tells me that Merlou is always in the best of tempers when he is contemplating a coup. He had been meeting some of the other labor leaders to-day, and will bring a little party of them here to-night."

"Perhaps it is to fête the coming revolution," said Antoine.

The room filled up, and the smoke from cigars and cigarettes hung, a delicate blue mist, in the air. The

orchestra played unceasingly, the dancers swayed to and fro in languorous movements and a dropping fire of popping champagne corks arose.

It was just after midnight when a large and hilarious party came in at the door. At the head of them marched Merlou. Three men and four women came behind him. They were shown to two tables evidently reserved for them.

The men were all in evening dress. Merlou wore his with something of an air, but his companions had the awkward look of men so dressed for the first time in their lives. The women were young, good looking and extravagantly dressed.

Antoine called the waiter, indicated the new arrivals and asked him if he knew who the ladies were.

"They are in the chorus of the *Folies Bergère*, Monsieur," was the reply. "I have seen them here before—but not with the same companions."

Merlou's party soon proved to be the noisiest in the room. Supper was laid at once, with a plentiful supply of champagne. There were frequent peals of laughter, in which the deep tones of the King of Paris rang out heartily. He was obviously the life and soul of the party. The others hung on his words, roared with laughter at his slightest sallies, and generally made him the hero of the feast.

The waiters distributed colored paper rolls, which, thrown about from table to table, hung about the room in festoons. To his great enjoyment Merlou was pelted by his companions, so that he was soon swathed in paper ribbons of all colors, out of which his jolly face emerged, wreathed in smiles, like Bacchus presiding at a fête.

"Do you notice those two men sitting quietly in that far corner—there in the alcove, where the light is

shaded," said Antoine suddenly. "Do you recognize them?"

Durand looked.

"It cannot be—but yes, it is—Inspector Sauvage and friend Pince. Then the Police are on their track too. We may see developments."

"I think not. They are probably merely keeping an eye on him, just as we are ourselves."

At Merlou's table the corks had been popping frequently. There came snatches of song from the group. Merlou raised his glass, filled with champagne.

"To the great day, *mes amis*," he said in a loud voice. There was a chorus of acclamation at the toast.

Pushing the table away from him, Merlou led one of his companions out to dance. He was a little unsteady on his feet and looked a grotesque figure with the festoons hanging about him. He soon showed that, whatever he might be as an orator, dancing was not one of his strong points. He careered awkwardly around the rather narrow space between the tables, dragging his partner round with him. The Tsiganes were grinning from ear to ear, and encouraging him with cries and a more feverish scraping of their fiddles.

It was too furious to last. Something happened to Merlou's feet, there came a little shriek from his partner, she dropped on her knees to save herself, and the next instant the King of Paris fell sprawling across a table which overturned with a crash, the supper with which it was laid flying in all directions.

A roar of laughter went round the big room. But an elegant gentleman wearing a monocle who had been sitting at the table, accompanied by a charming companion, was furious. One of the dishes on the table had been lobster salad, and this had scattered over himself and the lady with distressing effect.

"Imbecile!" hissed the elegant gentleman furiously. "What right have you to come into a place like this? You ought to be in the Zoological Gardens, you prancing elephant." The exquisite looked again at the bespattered clothes of his companion, and his eye blazed.

"*Chameau!*" he cried.

The vocabulary of the Parisian contains no greater insult than that of "camel." It had a certain effect even on the exhilarated King of Paris, who was still sitting on the floor, looking up at the ruin he had caused.

"Camel yourself!" exclaimed Merlou. "Cannot a man enjoy himself without being insulted? I have merely had a little champagne . . ."

"You have not had enough," cried the elegant gentleman, now more furious than ever. He picked up a bottle that was still half filled with the sparkling wine, and leaning over the table poured it carefully and systematically over the head and shoulders of the fallen roysterer. It ran down through his luxuriant, curling hair and made a horrid mess of the paper streamers that still twined round his ample shirtfront.

"Ten thousand devils!" roared the King of Paris, hoarse with rage. He scrambled to his feet with surprising agility, full of fight. But suddenly the *maître d'hôtel*, followed by a group of waiters, closed in between the two belligerents. A mighty hubbub followed, in which many of the spectators joined. Now and again the voice of the *maître d'hôtel* could be heard appealing for peace, promising that the clothes of Madame and Monsieur should be replaced, appealing to Merlou to go away—promising anything rather than have a free fight among his clients.

Antoine watched the scene with great enjoyment.

"Providence could not possibly have arranged it

better," he chuckled. "Do you not appreciate the mingled feelings with which the good workmen of Paris will read of this incident—how their King squanders their money on champagne; how he sits calmly on the floor while a member of the hated elegant classes against whom he is always declaiming so savagely pours more wine all over him, so that he looks like a draggled Pierrot at a rainy carnival? It comes at a most opportune moment just when Merlou and his fellow-conspirators are plotting something big. I have a title ready made for your article '*Le Roi s'Amuse.*' "

"Perfect," said Durand.

The uproar still went on, but to the disappointment of many of the spectators it was subsiding a little, and there seemed less chance of a scuffle between the two angry men. Gradually, with infinite tact and patience, the *maître d'hôtel* calmed the raging tempest. Bowing, smiling, exerting gentle pressure all the time, he managed to get Merlou back to his friends. There was another discussion there, but presently the whole group got up to leave. They went slowly to the door, much quieter and graver than when they came in.

All this time Inspector Sauvage and Pince had not moved from their coign of observation. But they also now got up to leave.

"I think we will go too," said Antoine. "We have seen all we want to."

At the foot of the stairs leading to the street they came on the two detectives. They were watching a group standing on the further side of the street, from which the voice of Merlou came in loud explanation.

"Ah good evening, Monsieur Poiret," said Inspector Sauvage. "I saw you sitting there, taking a keen interest in the little scene." He spoke with every def-

erence, but there was a twinkle in his eye. "And by the way, are we antagonists in this little affair also?"

"Not at all, Inspector," laughed Antoine, "but friendly collaborators I hope, working for the good of the country. But I leave the King of Paris to your tender care. We have seen all we want to see of him—for the present."

VI

The article describing the amusement of the King of Paris appeared at an even more opportune moment than Antoine had imagined. For on the day it was published in *La Lumière* the news first leaked out that Merlou and his kind had at last decided on the General Strike.

The movement was to be complete and crushing. The forms of law and order were to be set at naught, but without violence. At a given moment everything was simply to stop—the railways, the builders, the bakers, the electricians, the carters, the miners—and the workers were to sit by with folded arms while industrial and commercial paralysis descended upon France. It was to be a passive war, organized on the greatest scale in history.

The most sinister thing behind the movement was that the men's leaders had little to quote in the way of grievances. More money was wanted, true, but the main idea was to show the power of the organized worker over all other classes.

"Ours is a war," Merlou had been fond of declaiming in his speeches, "of the cloth cap against the silk hat, of the man of hard hands and muscles against the pampered *bourgeois* who ride in taxicabs or motor-cars; of the man who is glad to get his thin red wine

against the rich bloodsuckers who wallow in champagne. It is the day of the worker, and the end of the man who exploits him."

And the crowds had cheered him to the echo. Merlou, standing on a platform, his face aflame with apparently righteous anger for the lot of the workers, his hands waving and his luxuriant locks tossing, was a sight to arouse frantic enthusiasm.

And in the midst of the excitement and apprehension caused by the news that the General Strike was at last coming appeared the article in *La Lumière* with the ironical heading "*Le Roi s'Amuse.*"

The story of Merlou's carouse in a Montmartre night café took Paris by storm. The whole of the press of Paris realized for once that it was not a time for jealousy, and quoted the story freely. It was telegraphed all over France, and to countries far beyond. The picture of Merlou sitting on the floor, dripping with champagne, entwined in damp paper streamers and roaring to the insult of *chameau* was irresistible. Durand had felt that this was the big moment of his life, and had etched in the scene most cleverly. Paris was one huge chuckle. This man who had declaimed against champagne sitting on the floor and taking a bath of it at the hands of one of those elegant individuals whose pleasure it was his to deride! What a precious joke!

Within the day some deservedly unknown poet had written a song *Le Roi s'Amuse*, and the *camelots*, shouting it out hoarsely, were hawking it all over Paris. The incident crept into the music hall revues and the *cafés chantants*. The comic papers hastened to the subject. Before the week was out the story of Merlou and the champagne was a precious national possession.

Congratulations were showered on *La Lumière*, and joy reigned in every room. Even Morissot was seen to be indulging in grave laughter. And he it was who gave Antoine the news that Government circles were delighted with *La Lumière*.

"It is the best thing that has happened to the Cabinet since it came into office," he said. "This Premier is a hopeless nincompoop, but I'll say this for him, he knows a piece of good luck when he sees it."

Antoine did not conceal his delight at the great success of the article.

"It will hurt Merlou," he said. "It has hurt him already. The people are talking loudly about evening dress and champagne. Durand has been hanging about the small workmen's cafés and wineshops, and he has heard a good deal of dissatisfaction expressed. But Merlou is still strong. This incident has only shaken him badly. He has yet to receive his *coup-de-grâce*."

"You have something up your sleeve, *mon ami*."

Antoine tugged at his little beard.

"We shall see. But I will let you know in good time."

"I leave it to you," said Morissot.

Durand during this time paid careful attention to the *Café de l'Escalier Tournant*. In a casual way he had become quite friendly with the proprietor, and had even made some little progress in the good opinion of Madame because of the lavish way in which he dined. He was understood to be a young man "in the commerce," and Madame had privately decided that, for one who had a marriageable daughter of eighteen, he might perhaps be worth closer acquaintance.

Durand was dining there one evening when the Proprietor came up to him importantly.

"There is to be a big meeting to-night," he said—

"Merlou and all the rest of them. They are coming at nine."

"What's on?" asked Durand carelessly.

"Big things—the biggest. A special meeting about the great strike. And there will be criticism of Merlou for that little affair in a Montmartre night café. Ah! *le Roi s'Amuse!* How Paris laughed, hein!" He dropped his voice. "Even my wife, and she does not often laugh."

Durand felt this was the biggest compliment ever paid him.

"Will there be many here to-night?"

"Half a dozen—eight—ten, perhaps a dozen. All the chief men, you know. They prefer to drop in here casually, and talk things over with a bottle or so of wine, instead of meeting at the offices of the Syndicalist Federation. It attracts less attention. And then up there, at the offices, the police have their spies. They are everywhere, these *mouchards*. You ought to hear what Merlou says about them. A jovial one that, eh?"

Durand let his host rattle on, and finished his dinner leisurely. He knew exactly where to get in communication with Antoine at any hour. "The Patron" would be interested to hear this bit of news. Perhaps he would decide to come along and be on the spot. Things had a way of happening when Antoine was about.

"I may come in again later on," he said. "It would be interesting, perhaps, to be near when a meeting of such grave import is taking place. Where does the meeting take place?"

"In the room above this—a fine room. You have never seen it? They go up the spiral staircase there

in the corner and once upstairs they are shut off from the world—as private as a hermit in his cave."

A few minutes later Durand went out and made for the nearest telephone.

VII

"Ten minutes past nine, and our friends have not arrived yet," said Antoine. They were sitting at a table near the spiral staircase which gave the café its name, apparently deeply engrossed in a game of chess.

"Here come two who look as though they belong to the Merlou family," said Durand. "Yes, I recognize the tall one . . . . It is Martin of the Builders' Syndicate."

The two newcomers were greeted warmly by the Proprietor, and after a few moments' conversation passed up the staircase. At short intervals four other men arrived. Then Merlou himself appeared, as full of assurance as ever. He gave a quick glance round the café, which contained only some half dozen people, shook the Proprietor warmly by the hand, and followed the others. Two more went the same way. They were the last. A waiter followed them with bottles of wine and glasses on a tray.

"Now the sitting has begun," said Antoine. "Our friends are deciding what is to be the fate of France."

The café was quiet, and the low hum of voices from the room above could be heard.

Gradually the voices grew louder, and there were dull sounds as though someone was thumping the table. As the waiter opened the door for an instant to pass through the voices suddenly swelled out into an angry roar.

"They are discussing the affair of Merlou and the champagne," said Durand. "He seems to be getting it hot."

Antoine nobbed: "It is tantalizing not to be up there. I wonder if anything could be done with the waiter?"

The sounds of strife now came louder, from the room above, and the people in the café raised their heads inquiringly.

Suddenly there rang out the "Bang, bang!" of a pistol. The waiter was half-way up the staircase at the moment, with another bottle of wine on a tray. It dropped with a crash. The Proprietor and Madame stared from behind the counter, transfixed.

"Come on. We must be in this" said Antoine.

With one bound he was on the staircase, and Durand after him. Half way up the waiter, still standing there, tried to stop him.

"You cannot pass, Monsieur. It is private."

"Nonsense. Assassinations cannot be conducted in private. Or do you want me to call the police? Go first then, quick."

The waiter went up none too gaily and pushed open the door. Antoine followed him, with Durand next and the proprietor now running up frantically behind.

Sitting in a chair, held by three of his companions was Merlou, his face a study in varying expressions. Near the table in the center of the room stood the rest of the delegates. Antoine could see no sign of a dead body.

The proprietor stumbled into the room.

"Messieurs—what does this mean," he panted. "Is anybody killed?"

"No—nobody is even touched. It is all right," said one of the group soothingly. "A little accident.

Somebody was examining a pistol, and it went off accidentally. It is nothing."

"Are you sure the one sitting in the chair is not injured?" insinuated Antoine.

"No, he certainly is not hit," replied with emphasis the man who had already spoken. "He was the one . . ." He suddenly checked himself. "Monsieur will pardon me, but it is none of his business."

"It is the business of every good Frenchman to interfere where wrong or violence is being done," said Antoine with a fine gesture. "I have many influential friends in administrative circles, but I speak now as a simple citizen, *bien entendu.*"

The red ribbon in his buttonhole lent weight and meaning to his words. The man looked at him with a new interest.

"Will Monsieur step aside a moment with me. I assure you," he went on in an earnest undertone, "that it is as I said. We were assembled here to discuss a purely business matter. A certain detail cropped up over which harsh words were used. One of us—the one in the chair to be exact—became furious at the criticisms leveled at him. To our amazement he suddenly jumped up, brandishing a pistol. He did not point it at anybody, and was disarmed by several of us almost immediately—but not before the pistol had gone off twice. You may see the holes there in the ceiling. That is all—and we are very keenly desirous that there should be no scandal. It would be bad for the Proprietor here, who is a good soul."

"Perfectly. You would hate to have the police mixed up in an affair of this kind." Antoine's eye had been roving round during this short conversation. The table was in disorder and bottles had been overturned. Near at hand he noticed that a piece of paper closely

covered with writing, the ink of which was still wet, lay on the floor. That might be very well worth getting hold of.

There came the noise of footsteps on the staircase outside. Madame appeared, her countenance for once shocked out of its usual impassivity. She ran to her husband.

"There is a man down there," she quavered. "I think he is a detective—he is questioning Jules—I was standing by the foot of the staircase and ran up—oh!" And she sank down on a chair.

The news cast consternation in the room. It increased when a heavy foot was heard on the staircase. There was a sudden rush round to the chair in which Merlou still sat, and hurried whispers were exchanged. Antoine bent down carelessly and picked up the paper.

A moment later the figure of Inspector Sauvage appeared in the doorway. His eyebrows went up with surprise—and some annoyance—when he saw Antoine.

"You!"

"Good evening, Inspector," said Antoine politely.

The man with whom Antoine had previously spoken came forward swiftly.

"You wish to speak with someone," he said to the Inspector, with admirable coolness.

"I am an Inspector of the *Sûreté*," returned Sauvage a little stiffly.

"Ah, perfectly. There is no need for your presence here, I assure you. A joke—a harmless little joke. I will explain it. But first—you seem to know this gentleman." He pointed to Antoine. "Will you be good enough to tell me who he is?"

The Inspector looked at Antoine inquiringly. Antoine shrugged his shoulders carelessly.

"It is M. Poiret, Director of *La Lumière*" said the Inspector.

"*La Lumière!*" cried the man. "*Sacrebleu! La Lumière!*" His eyes glared. "And I told him . . . *Mon Dieu!*"

He seemed about to spring on Antoine.

"You told me very little indeed," said Antoine with a bow. "But *La Lumière* has other means of acquiring information . . . I bid you good evening, Messieurs."

He backed to the door, and Durand followed him. In the café a small crowd of people was staring up with keen curiosity. At the door they found Pince, who also looked surprised and saluted them rather coldly.

They hailed a passing taxicab. Inside Antoine pulled out the paper and by the aid of matches scanned it through.

"What's in it?" asked Durand with excitement.

"Nothing. The minutes of the meeting, Merlou's proposals of how and when to begin the General Strike . . . In fact, everything," concluded Antoine with a chuckle.

VII

THE new blow hit Merlou harder than the first.

"It is evident," said *La Lumière*, "that the King of Paris cannot enter a café without making himself supremely ridiculous. In one he blunders into a bath of champagne; in another he alarms his friends and the neighborhood by an unexpected and *maladroit* display of pistol practice. The time is surely not far off when the café proprietors of Paris will unite to keep so indelicate a customer off their premises."

In the same spirit of banter *La Lumière* recounted the scene round the table—Antoine and Durand had quite enough material to be able to reconstruct it—leading up to the quarrel as a result of the criticisms of Merlou's expensive habits in night cafés.

But just as interesting to Paris was Merlou's suggested way of giving the signal for the General Strike. The light was to be turned off in the evening, and with that was to come a stoppage of everything else—the railways, the tramways, the bakeries, and every other activity by which the people lived and moved and worked. At the signal of the King of Paris the capital and the whole of France was to be immobilized. It was a grandiose scheme, worthy of a King.

Merlou's name was heard on every hand. There were demonstrations in the streets against him, and some in favor of him. Rival groups came into collision, the police had to intervene and broke heads impartially on both sides.

But although he had his partisans, public opinion was heavily against him. A howl went up in the Press that such a man should be in the position to jeopardize the life of Paris and France. Morissot was not alone in flagellating the Government.

The Merlou revelations, it was soon apparent, had caused disaffection among the workers. And Antoine received information that there was a very wide split among the leaders, and that half of them at least insisted that Merlou should be dropped. Excitement was working up to fever heat.

The crisis came when Blondin, the great orator and undisputed leader of intellectual Socialism, lifted his powerful voice against Merlou.

"The man Merlou must be thrown aside," he wrote in his paper, the *Internationale*, an article adorned with

gigantic headlines. . . . "The fight for right and liberty cannot be led by a mountebank. Merlou is a wine-bibber and a *farceur*. His place is on the music-hall stage, and not in the forum. Let the honest proletariat of Paris beware against placing their trust in such a man, who denounces the luxury of the rich and himself squanders the money of the workers in high living." And much more to the same effect.

But Merlou fought best with his back to the wall. He still retained his faithful followers, and he was determined not to give in without a struggle. It was announced that there would be a monster meeting in the great Hippodrome at Montmartre, and that Merlou would address the workers in his own defense.

"The enemies of progress have risen against me," he said, in a high-sounding proclamation which was distributed amongst the members of the syndicates. "Harmless incidents have been magnified and distorted by the paid hirelings of the well-fed classes who are afraid of the power of the men of labor. But Merlou and the Right will prevail."

The next day a very interesting piece of news appeared in *La Lumière*. It was a despatch from its Moscow correspondent, which announced that Princess Alexandrovna Poprikoff, the famous Russian Socialist and revolutionary, was on her way to Paris to take part in the great social upheavals which were threatening there.

Some interesting biographical details were contained in the despatch. Princess Alexandrovna Poprikoff, it was explained, was the beautiful daughter of a Russian prince and a distant connection of the Imperial House of Romanoff. In spite of the great name and the luxury to which she had been born she was an ardent Socialist, and had devoted her life to a

study of industrial conditions. This was her first visit to Paris, and *La Lumière* hinted that the presence of such a powerful sympathizer at such a time in Paris might have considerable consequences on the general situation.

VIII

THERE was a feverish touch in the air of Paris on the night of Merlou's great stand against the disaster that threatened him.

All the streets that wind up the hill of Montmartre were thronged with people, who were kept constantly on the move by strong bodies of police with their insistent command of "*Circulez! Circulez!*"

In unexpected corners, too, soldiers were drawn up, their rifles piled in little heaps. And up and down the streets rode patrols of mounted guards, the clatter of their horses' hoofs sounding as sweetest music to the good law-abiding *bourgeois*, who feared that the forces of anarchy were about to break loose.

The Government, it was plain, was determined to take no chances and was ready to crush instantly any squabble amongst the ranks of the syndicalists which might threaten to burst out and spread to Paris itself.

Here, there and everywhere amongst the police and soldiers was to be seen M. Labiche, the famous Prefect of Police, a small man, insignificant in his dark overcoat and bowler hat, but with his fierce eagle eye constantly on the alert for the slightest sign of trouble.

In a taxicab that panted up the steep Rue Blanche were seated Antoine, Durand—and the Princess Alexandrovna Poprikoff.

"Police and soldiers everywhere," said Antoine

gravely, peering through the window. "It looks thrilling. . . . Even Morissot would have to admit that the Government is awake to-night."

The cab stopped and the door was opened by an *agent de police.*

"You cannot go any further in this. You must walk," he said.

Antoine produced his journalist's police pass; Durand another. The policeman noticed the red ribbon in Antoine's buttonhole.

"Bien, Messieurs. Pass on. As far as the Place Pigalle. You must get out there."

A few minutes later they found it was impossible to pass any further and had to leave the shelter of the cab. Police were all round them.

"Circulez! Circulez!" they commanded, as soon as the three were in the roadway. The Princess, a commanding figure in a splendid fur coat, took Antoine's arm.

All was confusion, with little knots of scared people running here and there to get out of the center of disturbance. The three managed to gain a comparatively quiet pavement, behind a line of police.

From a street close by came the sound of hooting, and loud cries of anger. The police began to look restive.

"This is warming up," said Antoine.

Suddenly from the street came the sharp "rap-rap-rap" of an automatic pistol.

"There's Citizen Browning speaking," said Durand. "Now we shall see something."

A body of cuirassiers appeared from nowhere, passed at a trot and charged down the street. Above the alarming rattle of hoofs came the shouts of the frightened crowd running away. There was pande-

monium for a few moments, a few more shots and then quiet.

At that moment the Prefect of Police passed close to them. Antoine seized the opportunity, recalled their previous meeting in the affair of *La Douloureuse*, and asked for facilities to get directly to the place of the meeting.

"By all means," said the Prefect courteously, and in the midst of his preoccupations called up a sergeant of police to accompany them.

The sergeant conducted them to the stage door, saluted and left. Here they found considerable difficulty in passing. A group of men on guard demanded special tickets before they could pass up to the platform. Antoine smilingly waved the idea aside. He explained with great importance who the lady with him was. She had arrived only that day from Moscow, and wished at all costs to be present at this meeting. They were politely asked to wait. One of the men went upstairs and presently came down to say that the princess and her attendants should be shown up at once.

They found themselves sitting at the side of a crowded stage, facing a vast audience of over ten thousand men who packed the great building. Merlou was speaking.

Antoine watched him fascinated. This man, with all his follies and his rogueries, was a great figure on the platform. He did not know how to behave in a night restaurant, but he had the power of swaying multitudes. There were hostile elements in the great crowd, and now and again there were interruptions, and cries referring to champagne. But like Mark Antony with the Romans, the King of Paris, by his persuasion and eloquence, was winning the crowd round to his side.

There was a pause in his speech. Someone behind him bent forward and whispered something. Merlou

turned to the meeting again. "My friends," he said, in his ringing voice, "you will be glad to know that there has just arrived here from Moscow the Princess Alexandrovna Poprikoff, one of the great ladies of Russia, who has made the cause of the workers her own. I will present her to you. You will know how to welcome her."

Way was made for the Princess, a tall, splendid figure, with a high fur collar turned up around her face. As she approached the center of the platform Merlou bowed gallantly and taking her by the hand led her forward. She looked magnificent as she stood there in her long fur coat, and the huge crowd received her with a thunder of acclamation.

The noise of the welcome died down. The Princess loosened the collar of her coat and made as if to speak. There was perfect quiet.

"Citizens of Paris," she said quickly, in a clear voice that carried all over the hall. "I have something important to say to you. I am not a Princess of Russia at all. I am a simple dressmaker of Paris, one of your own sisters. My name is Eugenie Vigneau. Not long ago this man Merlou came and made love to me. He was to marry me, and I was to be Queen of Paris. But he borrowed three thousand francs, and I have never seen him since until this moment. That is what . . ."

There came a roar of execration from the sea of white faces, and the sea suddenly became agitated as thousands of arms shot upwards. Merlou had darted forward and, turning the speaker sharply round, looked into the face of Eugenie. His own was suddenly contorted with passion, and in his rage, half-demented, he raised his clenched fist as if to strike her. At that there came another roar, louder than before, and from

ten thousand throats execrations and insults were hurled at Merlou.

The frenzy of the audience communicated itself to the platform, chairs were overturned, blows were struck and everybody was pushing and struggling desperately.

In the midst of the tumult Merlou's voice could be heard rallying his supporters round him. Antoine and Durand pushed their way desperately towards Eugenie. They reach her side, and made themselves her body-guard, while the frenzied people pushed and struggled round them. Merlou caught sight of Antoine. A look of understanding came into his eye. He shouted something that could not be heard, and fought to get at him. Other people were now fighting to get at Merlou. The melée became serious, even dangerous. Antoine received a blow from somebody, he knew not who. Eugenie was beginning to look pale and distressed.

Suddenly a posse of policemen surged in from the back. They thrust into the crowd scientifically, pushed people out willy-nilly through the door, and gradually cleared the platform. A burly form came between Antoine and Eugenie and their aggressors. Antoine had a glimpse of a struggling Merlou being hurried to the door by two stalwart policemen. He breathed more freely, and found himself looking into the face of Inspector Sauvage.

"So it appears," said the Inspector smiling, "that the police have their uses, even for you."

"*Merci*," said Antoine. "I shall not forget it."

The huge crowd in the hall had watched the unedifying spectacle on the platform with the greatest excitement. Now that the situation was a little less complicated, someone in the hall shouted:

"Three cries of execration for Merlou, the traitor."

A tremendous hooting and booing arose.

And then:

"Three cries of enthusiasm for Eugenie the Princess."

The cheers rolled out, tremendous in volume. Eugenie had to go to the edge of the platform and bow. There was a look of grim exultation in her fierce, fine eyes, and the grim lines of her mouth were relaxed in a smile.

"A triumph," cried Antoine into her ear as the uproar went on. "This is the last of the King of Paris."

"Yes. But the rogue has still got my three thousand francs."

"Ah, that is a little matter that must be seen to," said Antoine.

IX

The Prefect of Police stood surrounded by a brilliant group of officers. The crowd coming from the meeting was being guided down a long double line of police and soldiers. Once arrived at the end of this armed corridor the men were shepherded away alternately to left and right. All about the neighborhood more police and soldiers kept them on the move, so as to prevent any further concentration.

"Circulez, circulez!" the police uttered repeatedly and monotonously. But though some of the more eager spirits among the police looked about hopefully for signs of resistance to their orders there were none to be seen. On the contrary, it might have been a crowd coming out in the happiest of humors from a Palais Royal farce.

"C'est extraordinaire," exclaimed the little Prefect, fingering his pointed white beard. "I expected trouble, and here they are all coming out singing and laughing. What can have happened?"

A cry went up:

"Down with Merlou, the traitor!" It was greeted with cheers.

Another cry:

"Down with the General Strike!" It was followed by a shout with enthusiasm.

"So," said the Prefect, his keen eyes glistening with amusement, "than the King of Paris is deposed—and his General Strike, too. Well, that is one nuisance the less." He tugged the famous little white beard. "But there will soon be others."

CHAPTER IV

BLACKMAIL FOR TWO

I

It is not to be supposed that the triumphant enterprise of *La Lumière* in the affair of *La Douloureuse* and the downfall of Merlou, King of Paris, had excited feelings only of admiration amongst its contemporaries of the Paris press. It is too much to expect of human nature that the success of a young rival should be accepted with unalloyed gladness by those who are convinced that such good fortune belongs by long-established right only to them.

But while most of the older newspapers looked on at the growing influence of *La Lumière* with an interest which, if quite innocent of benevolence, was not actuated by calculated hostility, there was one journal which had marked it down as a victim to be sacrificed. This was *Le Jour*, most powerful and, when necessary, most unscrupulous of all Paris newspapers.

More than once before this an upstart rival, preening itself in all the confidence and vigor of impetuous youth, had been swept out of existence by the same implacable agency. *Le Jour* had great power, and it was a power derived not only from the command of unlimited money. Its influence was felt in a hundred unexpected ways. It had accomplished many praiseworthy things, but this

did not prevent it from doing bad ones when, in the opinion of *Le Jour*, the case demanded it. It had exposed scandals, and had been the cause of others. It had made Governments and wrecked them. Statesmen and financiers were in its power. It knew the secrets of many men. When the time came for one such to be useful, *Le Jour* summoned him, and made known its terms. It rarely failed to get what it wanted, for the strongest man could not hope to stand against a campaign, insidious or open, waged against him in a newspaper which sold by the million.

M. Alexandre Tardivel, who was at the head of this powerful organization, had guided the destinies of *Le Jour* for the past twenty-five years. A small and alert man of sixty-five, he was the soul of courtesy, and a charming individual to meet. He was a well-known art connoisseur, and his domestic life was irreproachable. But where the affairs of *Le Jour* were concerned he was swayed by one consideration only—the welfare, as he conceived it, of his journal. In this cause he could be hard as steel, as ruthless as a Prussian. For the well-being of *Le Jour* he would have sacrificed his dearest friend.

His interest in *La Lumière* was first keenly awakened when that newspaper gave exclusively to the world the story of the theft of the most famous picture of all time. He was not long in discovering that the guiding spirit of this enterprising contemporary was one Antoine Poiret, an individual until then hardly heard of on the Boulevards.

To M. Alexandre Tardivel it was a cause for the bitterest mortification that *Le Jour* should have been so completely outclassed in the affair of *La Douloureuse*. His irritation knew no bounds when *La Lumière* repeated its success in the crushing of Merlou, the red-hot

syndicalist, who at one time seemed to have all Paris under his thumb. And from that time M. Tardivel determined that both *La Lumière* and its guiding genius, Antoine Poiret, must be swiftly accounted for.

M. Tardivel was not long in finding something to work upon. That private office of his round which so many legends, authentic and fantastic, had clustered (its walls were said to be made of steel, with a sliding steel door, which M. Tardivel could close by pressing a button under his desk) was a sounding-board for all Paris. There was no whisper of the Boulevards that did not find its echo there.

Blackmail is an ugly word. But none knew better than M. Tardivel what a powerful lever it could be. A cynic, he believed that every man had something in his life which he was desirous of concealing from the world. And in the case of Antoine Poiret he soon found what he believed would suit his purpose to perfection.

II

Antoine was sitting at his desk one morning, studying a report made by his advertisement manager, when Bourdot entered hurriedly.

"Read this," said the confidant of Duchesses abruptly.

Antoine saw that Bourdot had marked a paragraph in the "Notes of the Day" of *Le Jour*. . . . It was a very short paragraph. Antoine took the paper and read:

> "A little-known adventure is that which some time ago befell the Director of one of our younger contemporaries. With commendable wisdom he provided himself with somebody else's money, and proceeding to Monte Carlo tried his fortune at the

tables. His luck was of the best, and it is from this fortunate episode that dates all his success. It is so rare for anybody to leave Monte Carlo with a good deal more than he took there that the story deserves some day to be told in full."

Antoine stared hard at the paragraph, and reread it carefully.

"You know what that means," said Bourdot breathlessly. "You see what is behind it?"

"Do you think it means . . . ?"

"Absolutely. *Le Jour* has got its eye on us. We have been doing too well."

Antoine was very quiet.

"You are convinced that I am the one aimed at in this?"

"Who else can it be? Of course it is you."

"Yes, I suppose it is so. It was a little unfortunate, that Monte Carlo affair. And yet, just as this paragraph says, all our good fortune dates from it—yours and Morissot's, as well as mine. And you know, *mon cher* Bourdot, how innocent were my motives—how little I intended that anybody should suffer from my little experience at the tables.

"*Mon cher ami*, of course I know. Do not speak of it. And does not *La Lumière* owe its success to you?" said Bourdot warmly. "The point now is, what do you think of this little development?"

Antoine jumped from his seat and paced the floor in agitation.

"I think with you that I am the one aimed at. And we know well enough that *Le Jour* would not publish a paragraph such as that without there being a good deal more behind it. What does it say, 'The story deserves some day to be told in full.' That is plain enough. We

have caused jealousy, eh, *mon ami! La Lumière* has been making itself felt too much. I knew that our successes had been talked about. But I did not expect anything like this. . . . It is that animal Tardivel, I suppose. He sits there in his office like a spider. And he cannot tolerate that we, the little *Lumière*, should have done things which he and his big bully of a paper have not been able to do. To think that such a man exists at this time of day! He belongs to the Middle Ages."

"And what do you think his object is?" He knew well enough, but wanted to see how much Antoine realized it.

"Why, to crush us, *tout simplement*—or to crush me, anyhow. He has searched for our weakest spot. He thinks he has found it. This little announcement is the declaration of war. We shall soon hear more."

They were silent for a space, both thinking hard. It was no light matter to find *Le Jour* suddenly declared as an enemy.

"*Courage, mon ami,*" said Bourdot cheerfully. "*La Lumière* is not dead yet. You are not a man to be beaten too easily. And we will stick to you to the end."

"*Merci,*" said Antoine a little huskily.

Antoine heard more even sooner than he had expected. That very afternoon a letter came from *Le Jour* praying M. Antoine Poiret to be good enough, if he could spare the time, to call the next day at three o'clock to discuss a business matter of some importance.

The letter was signed "A. Tardivel," and assured M. Poiret of his most cordial and distinguished consideration.

A little council of war consisting of Antoine, Bourdot and Morissot was held on it.

"The villain, how I wish he were just a politician," said Morissot; "I would annihilate him."

But this was not a case for Morissot's vitriolic pen. It was unanimously decided that Antoine should politely accept the "invitation." There was no way out.

"I shall listen quietly to all he has to say," said Antoine. "No doubt the ruffian will be very polite. . . . Then we shall know where we stand. We do not give in without a struggle. Is it not so, my friends?"

They shook hands solemnly all round.

III

The palatial offices of *Le Jour* stood in a quiet side street just off the main Boulevard. Antoine's heart was beating a little more quickly than usual as he entered the busy doorway.

A uniformed porter took his card, and entered the name up carefully in a book. Antoine could see by the celerity with which his card was despatched on its journey that special instructions had been given to see that he was immediately attended to. It was an example of the organization of *Le Jour*. Antoine smiled as he thought of the careless and happy methods of his own office. . . . And yet those methods, or lack of them, had accomplished some very satisfactory things. He cheered up at the thought.

A moment later he was traversing interminable corridors behind a guide, who presently knocked at a door and opened it.

Antoine found himself in a large and noble apartment with handsome furniture. The thick carpet felt

luxurious to the feet; the walls were lined with book-shelves and cabinets.

A small, white-haired man, sitting at a very large desk, rose at his entrance. Antoine walked forward.

"I am very happy to make your acquaintance, Monsieur Poiret," said the little man pleasantly. "It is always agreeable to meet one's rivals in that great profession to which we both have the honor to belong. Will you pray be seated."

"You are extremely kind," said Antoine, and took the chair offered him.

"Will you smoke?" M. Tardivel held forward a box of excellent cigars. Antoine took one willingly. It would soothe his nerves.

M. Tardivel also took a cigar, and began to talk of things in general. His voice was low and pleasant, he had a quick and happy smile, and his observations on matters of mutual interest to them were spirited and amusing. In ten minutes Antoine felt that he had known M. Tardivel for a very long time. . . . It required an effort for him to realize what really lay behind this attractive prelude. This was not at all what he had expected.

"By the way," said M. Tardivel without the slightest change or tone or manner, "did you notice with any particular interest a small paragraph in our 'Notes of the Day' yesterday?" He smiled gently, as though he were listening attentively to a good story.

"Sapristi, what a man!" was Antoine's thought. His answer came quickly.

"No. I usually read the excellent notes of *Le Jour* but I did not see anything which interested me more than usual."

"Not a few lines referring to an incident at Monte Carlo?"

Antoine shook his head.

"Ah! Then you have no idea of the nature of the business I wish to discuss with you."

"Not the slightest, Monsieur."

"Oh well, it can soon be explained," said M. Tardivel affably. He was leaning back in his chair, enjoying his cigar with zest. "I believe it is a fact that you hold a controlling interest in *La Lumière.* I wish to possess myself of your shares."

"But I do not wish to sell, Monsieur."

"Possibly not. But I wish to have them just as much as you wish to keep them. The point, Monsieur Poiret, is which one of us will prevail?" And M. Tardivel's eyes twinkled with good humor.

"But this is extraordinary," said Antoine, assuming an expression of amazement. "As I said, I have no desire to sell them. . . . But that apart, what should you propose to pay for them."

"One hundred thousand francs," said M. Tardivel, calmly.

Antoine laughed.

"But you are joking. That is certainly not a fifth of their value. . . . Your proposition is a little fantastic, M. Tardivel."

"I never joke in matters of business. Would you be good enough to read the paragraph which I have already referred to." He passed over a little slip pasted on a sheet of paper.

Antoine read the paragraph, as if for the first time, puzzling his brows over it.

"I am afraid this mystifies me more than ever," he said.

"Ah! Then let me be a little more explicit." M. Tardivel crossed the room to one of the cabinets, took out a long drawer and brought it back to his desk.

Antoine noted that the drawer was filled with scores of envelopes arranged alphabetically. Running his finger down M. Tardivel pulled up an envelope. This action dislodged the one next to it, which remained sticking up above the rest. Antoine noticed a name on it. "Baron Nicolas de Plex."

"*Tiens*, has he got *him* there also, then!" Antoine murmured to himself. He felt that he was in good company to be next to a leading member of one of the most famous financial houses in the world.

M. Tardivel, sitting down, spoke again.

"I have in this envelope the record of a certain adventure. It is in some ways an amusing and sympathetic story. It tells at some length how the cashier and business manager of a certain establishment—a newspaper office to be precise—proceeded to Monte Carlo with a considerable sum of money, which he there risked at the tables—and curiously enough, with the happiest results. I have had some small experience of Monte Carlo myself, but I was never fortunate. However, the point of the story I am briefly outlining to you is this—that the money taken to Monte Carlo by the person in question was not his own." M. Tardivel puffed tranquilly for a moment at his cigar. "The money belonged to a certain financier of the second order—a certain Leblanc who is I believe still in prison, awaiting the moment when a leisurely judicature shall have sufficiently unraveled his affairs to know precisely what to charge him with. Ours it a wonderful country, is it not, M. Poiret?"

"Truly," said Antoine.

"To resume. The fact that this Leblanc whose money was—er—borrowed for the Monte Carlo enterprise proved to be a person of indifferent repute now most happily in the hands of the law—this fact, I say,

while it imparts a certain element of humor into the affair—it is always agreeable to hear of the biter being bit—does not in any way absolve the person who, to use a euphemism, borrows the money which was not his own. The culpability of that person remains undisturbed. I trust my point is clear."

"It might have been put a little clearer," said Antoine audaciously, "but I think I see what you mean."

"Then I think that is all that is necessary," M. Tardivel resumed, in the same level pleasant voice, "although, of course, I could state the matter more bluntly if I wished. But I abhor bluntness, M. Poiret. We are a polite nation. . . . But as I was saying, the culpability of this person is not lessened by the fact that this Leblanc proved to be a dishonest financier. In short, the person I am referring to stole the money for his own purposes. That is the point we must not lose sight of. Since the incidents I have described occurred the individual we are discussing has made great strides in his career. He has, in fact, been a startling success. The enterprise which he controls has made wonderful progress. Not to labor the point, then, Monsieur Poiret, you will see how inconvenient it would be for him if a journal with the influence and circulation of *Le Jour* decided that this unfortunate little adventure of his should be published to the world."

"*Parfaitement.*"

"Now, Monsieur Poiret, may I ask you whether you were already familiar with the story I have outlined to you?"

"With one somewhat similar—but not quite the same. At any rate the story does not bear the same complexion as the one you have been at such pains to describe."

M. Tardivel's eyes twinkled.

"I see. But the world in these matters, as you know, judges harshly. And now, Monsieur Poiret, a further and, I trust, a final question. Do you now see any reason why you should accept the business proposal I made to you just now?"

"None," said Antoine shortly.

"Ah!" M. Tardivel's eyebrows went up. For the first time during their interview his mask of geniality seemed a trifle disturbed. He leaned back in his chair and resumed the enjoyment of his cigar.

As for Antoine he felt that he could fall on this suave little monster and tear him to bits. As he sat in his chair his face was white, and his fingers clenched and unclenched with passion. This genial polite villainy, this polished and choicely worded exposition of a cynical plan to cause his ruin, had been too much. It was his rage that had given him courage to defy a man who he knew had the power to break him.

M. Tardivel spoke again:

"I am, if I may say so without offense, an older man than you, Monsieur Poiret. I have had considerable experience in this sort of thing, and I feel convinced that after you have thought the matter over quietly you will see as I do. I will give you a week, no more, to think it over. If I do not hear from you within that time it will be my painful duty to take the measures I have suggested.

"Then that is all," said Antoine harshly.

"For the present, Monsieur Poiret."

"Then I bid you good day," said Antoine, rising and turning on his heel.

"Good day, Monsieur Poiret," came the polite tones of M. Tardivel behind him.

The door opened as he reached it. Outside the man

who had conducted him there stood waiting. Antoine followed him out of the building, his brain a whirl of anger. He gasped with relief as he stood in the free air of the Boulevard again.

But what was to be done? What chance had he of checkmating this powerful and unscrupulous little man?

IV

Baron Nicholas de Plex was one of the best-known figures in Parisian society. He took an active interest in the great international banking house to which he belonged, but this did not prevent him from making the most of life in many other directions.

It was generally understood that he saw very little of the Baroness, but wherever the fashionable world was gathered there the Baron was to be found. He was as well known at Cowes as at Deauville; his steam yacht was a welcome visitor at Monte Carlo, his racing stable was one of the finest in France, and from winter sports at St. Moritz to "finding the Lady" on Epsom Downs and tarpon fishing off Florida there was little he had not done. He spoke all the languages of Europe, and was said to pride himself on his perfect Rumanian accent.

In Paris he possessed a large mansion near the Parc Monceau, but his favorite residence was what he called his "bachelor's den"—a most commodious and luxurious flat on the Champs Elysées. It was famous for its excellent supper parties, and the Baron was never so happy as when presiding over one of these entertainments. A man of an open and generous mind he cared little as to who his guests might be, provided they washed and were interesting. Poets, actresses, Cabinet Ministers, successful jockeys, financiers, and even mem-

bers of Society sat happily together under their generous host, who possessed the great gift of making everybody appreciate everybody else so long as he was present. One of his most successful soirées had been when amongst the many guests at his table he had the most famous matador in Spain, the heavyweight boxing champion of the world and the Public Executioner of France, who charmed everybody by his gentlemanly and unassuming bearing.

On this particular evening of Antoine's visit to *Le Jour*, the Baron was at his flat putting on the dress clothes which his valet had laid out for him. He felt a little dissatisfied as he had nothing to do after dinner, and to a man of the Baron's temperament there was nothing quite so dreadful. There was a knock at the door of his dressing-room and the valet entered with a card. The Baron read "M. Antoine Poiret, Director of *La Lumière*."

"He says, Monsieur le Baron, that the affair is one of importance. He seems to be in a state of some excitement," ventured the valet.

"Let him wait in the smoking-room. I shall be there in a few minutes," said the Baron.

A few moments later the Baron, impressive in his perfect evening dress, greeted his visitor, who he noticed seemed pale and worried.

"What can I do for you, Monsieur Poiret?" he said politely.

"I am sorry to disturb you, Monsieur le Baron, and I trust it is not an inconvenient hour," said Antoine. "I have been trying to find you for some hours past. I have been to your offices, to your house, to the Jockey Club . . ."

"It sounds urgent, your business," said the Baron, smiling.

"It is urgent—and peculiar. I wish to consult you on a very curious matter. What I have to tell you will require some little explanation. I trust you will have time to listen to me."

"But what is the nature of this affair?"

"It concerns M. Tardivel of *Le Jour*, myself and to a certain extent, yourself. . . ." Antoine spoke hurriedly and with feeling. "I am the victim of an odious conspiracy which vitally concerns my own career and that of the paper which I control. I have come to you decided, if you will permit it, to impart a certain confidence to you in the hope that you may be able to advise me in a very difficult situation."

"You intrigue me, Monsieur Poiret. This sounds almost exciting. . . . How long will it take you to tell me?"

"Half an hour, perhaps. How much longer depends on whether you think you may be able to interest yourself in the matter."

"Half an hour is a long time, and I begin to feel that it is near dinner time. . . . But I have an idea. Will you dine with me, and then we can talk over the matter at leisure."

"It is most kind of you . . . but I am not dressed."

"That does not matter. If you wish we will take a private room somewhere. I have nothing to do this evening. No doubt your story will save me from boredom. My car is waiting down at the door. Come."

And Antoine for the first time since his interview with M. Tardivel began to feel that fortune had not deserted him.

The drive down the Champs Elysées in the Baron's luxurious laudaulette soothed him. They stopped at a well-known café in the Rue Royale, and in a twinkling as it seemed to Antoine they were sitting in a cosy

cabinet particulier with a deferential *maître d'hôtel* taking the Baron's order.

They chatted about all sorts of matters during dinner. It was not until coffee and cigars were before them that the Baron signified his desire to hear Antoine's story.

"And now for your revelations," he said.

Antoine smiled.

"They are perhaps not so sensational as all that, Monsieur le Baron. But in two words the idea is to ruin the paper I direct, and incidentally myself. You have heard of Alexandre Tardivel, I presume."

The Baron laughed.

"Have I not."

"And you no doubt know something of his methods?"

"A little."

"Then perhaps you will be able to understand already something of this affair. But with your permission I will begin at the beginning and tell you everything. I have to make a little confession of my own, but I know how implicitly I can trust you in regard to my own small affairs."

The Baron inclined his head to the compliment, and Antoine began his story. He told of the Monte Carlo adventure, the happy ending to it, the subsequent growth of *La Lumière*, and something of his own share in that success, ending up with his interview with M. Tardivel. The Baron listened with the keenest interest.

"It is a pretty idea," he said when Antoine had finished. "What an ingenious and implacable scoundrel Tardivel is. But there is one thing you said when I first saw you this evening which I do not yet understand. You said that I also was to some extent concerned in this. I do not yet see where I enter."

"That is simple," said Antoine. "You and I, if I

may say so, are in a sense together in this affair. Neighbors I might almost say. That was why I thought of coming to you. The next envelope to mine in M. Tardivel's drawer of secret documents was marked with your name."

"The devil it was!" The Baron sat up straight in his chair.

"Yes. I was fortunate enough to be able to notice that. When I left him, after his odious proposal, my brain was on fire with anger and distress. I felt powerless in the hands of this merciless man. But as I walked away from the office of *Le Jour* your name came into my head. The idea—I trust you will pardon the thought—that my little story and something concerning yourself were lying side by side in that sinister cabinet made me feel that perhaps you would listen to my story, and perhaps help me if you could. I jumped into a taxi to go in search of you. And that is all."

The Baron smiled thoughtfully as he knocked the ash off his cigar.

"And so I am in the box too. I wonder what for." He passed his hand over his forehead. "I am nearly fifty years of age, Monsieur Poiret. I have lived a life that has been full of incident, even excitement. I have perhaps been a little too assiduous in the search for pleasure—and naturally I have not always found it. But all the same I cannot remember ever having done any man, or woman, any great harm. I wonder what it is that he can be holding over my head. I would give much to know."

"Perhaps some day, when he thinks you might be useful to him, he will acquaint you with it."

"Very likely. That is the Tardivel system. And I assure you I should enjoy the interview thoroughly. I am already torn with curiosity to know what he has in

the envelope that bears my name, and I think I should be ready to agree to any terms in advance to find out now what form his threat would take. . . . However, that must wait. And now about your affair. He has given you a week's grace. If at the end of that time you do not fall in with his suggestion he attacks you and *La Lumière*. Now tell me, how exactly did you think I might be able to help you?"

"*Ma foi*, my ideas were rather vague. But one thing I did think of. It is M. Tardivel's motto in life that every man is vulnerable somewhere. Every man has something in his life which he desires to keep secret, is I believe his way of putting it. It occurred to me then, that perhaps M. Tardivel himself might have a vulnerable spot. But how to find out? I know so little about him. Then I thought of you. You know so many people, have so much power and influence. It was a desperate hope. I have no right to expect that you would be willing to see it as I do. But if there is a way of checkmating this medieval plotter I thought you would be the man to show me."

"That is a sound idea of yours—to look for the vulnerable spot in the man who believes that every other man is vulnerable somewhere. But I also know very little about him. . . . But stay a moment. Has not Tardivel a son, Gaston, a young man about twenty-three?"

"I believe he has."

"I heard about something only the other day in which that name cropped up—something disreputable too. A card scandal at one of the clubs. . . . It is very possible that it would be Tardivel's son. A young man with rather a lively reputation all round I believe. . . . Now if it were so, and the father really had a very weak spot in his son? Would that suit you, M. Poiret?"

"But splendidly! I felt somehow you would be able to help," cried Antoine, his face lighting up with sudden excitement and hope. "If there is really anything in that I should hold a far stronger card over that bad old man than he holds over me. I have no wish to hurt the son—but my first thought must be to protect myself, my paper, my *confrères*. And I do not think this old scoundrel would go on with his scheme of ruining me if I could show him that, just for once, two could play at his game."

"You would be perfectly justified," said the Baron. "Perhaps this affair of the son may help you—perhaps not. But it is certainly worth trying. Why not become active at once?"

"There is nothing that would please me better. I shall never be able to thank you enough."

"I think I know where we might be able to find him at once. How long would it take you to dress and return here? My car is still available."

"Three-quarters of an hour."

"Good. Then I will wait here until you return."

V

Antoine some time before this had moved from his modest quarters in Montmartre and taken a small but handsome flat in the new Boulevard Raspail. In the Baron's luxurious car he arrived there in less than ten minutes and at once rang up the office. Morissot answered, and Antoine gave him a hurried outline of what had happened between him and Tardivel, passing on to his interview with the Baron.

"It sounds promising," said Morissot. "I have heard of that young man. I believe he is quite a source of worry to his dear old father. Stick to it. It may save

us. And don't forget, we leave it entirely to you. *Bonne chance!*"

Antoine dressed swiftly, surveyed himself in the glass with satisfaction, and was back with the Baron in less than the time he had allowed himself.

"There is no hurry," said the Baron. "Our young man is not likely to be seen too early in the evening. I will dismiss the car and we will stroll up the Boulevards at our leisure."

They picked their way along the crowded pavements and several times the Baron was saluted with much *empressement* by distinguished looking gentlemen whom they passed. Antoine felt that it was good to be in such company. The cloud that had been hanging over him all day had lifted. There was something about the Baron that inspired confidence and security. With such an ally things would surely come out all right.

They continued their walk down the Avenue de l'Opera and here the Baron turned into a doorway which Antoine knew was that of the "Cercle de l'Armée," one of the most exclusive clubs in Paris. The Baron spoke to a porter, who said something in reply in a very low voice.

"This is getting quite interesting," said the Baron as they walked into the club. "Young Tardivel is no longer a member here. The little scandal I mentioned was investigated by the Committee a few days ago, and as a result it was intimated to him that his presence here was no longer required."

Antoine whistled happily.

"What a piece of luck—I trust, Baron, you do not mind my so regarding it. I have never met this young man, and I confess I should be delighted to hear that he was as big a blackguard openly as his infamous father is in another fashion. To be turned out of the

Cercle de l'Armée—it is already a good deal. Tardivel *père* would not be pleased this evening to know that I knew that. I wonder if he knows it himself?"

They were sitting now in the smoke-room. A very old waiter, his head shiny and round as a billiard ball, stood near.

"You see the waiter there, old Pierre," said the Baron. "He has a genius for knowing everything about every member here—and a good many other things too. I think it might be as well to have a discreet word with him."

He signaled to Pierre, and ordered two liqueurs. When the old man returned with them the Baron encouraged him to talk. Pierre, much flattered, availed himself of the chance, and led up adroitly to the subject of the Baron's racing stable, hoping to pick up some valuable crumbs of information.

"One of these days, Pierre, when I know it, I will tell you something good," said the Baron. "As a rule I am the last man to hear anything really interesting about my own horses. But, by the way, where is young Tardivel who used to be here so much?"

Pierre spread out his hands with a gesture that might have meant anything.

"Monsieur le Baron has not heard? He left here . . . suddenly. Only a few days ago. There was a little . . . discussion . . . in the card room, and Monsieur Tardivel was judged to be in the wrong . . . He plays high, that young man."

"Ah, and so he has left. And where does he exercise his talents now?"

"Not very far from here, or so I believe, Monsieur le Baron. There has been a new *tripot* opened in the Rue Helder—a most *chic* place I am told. So far the police do not seem to have heard anything about it—

or at any rate they have not paid it a visit. And M. Tardivel I believe passes a good deal of his time there. Number 91 Rue Helder. The second floor."

"Thank you, Pierre," laughed the Baron. There was no mistaking the way in which the waiter had insisted on the address. "But I don't propose to go there." And the old man went off with a profound bow.

The Baron looked at Antoine.

"A new and luxurious *tripot!* It recalls the misspent years of my youth. I haven't been inside a gambling den—at least the kind that is frowned on by the law—for a very long time. M. Poiret—do you feel adventurous?"

Antoine's eyes twinkled.

"I should desire nothing better."

They walked back slowly up the Avenue, and shortly arrived at 91 Rue Helder.

"It seems innocent enough," said the Baron, looking up at the building. "But we will try the second floor."

After ascending two flights of a broad carpeted staircase they found themselves outside a door which seemed all innocence. The Baron pressed the bell, the door opened and a man in the livery of a *valet de pied* appeared. Without speaking a word the Baron stepped inside.

The man looked at them.

"You are not members, Messieurs. But," and he bowed to the Baron. "I once had the honor to be in the household of Monsieur le Baron." He hesitated, not quite knowing what to say. . . . "No doubt it will be all right. *En tout cas*, with Monsieur le Baron it will be a simple formality without the slightest difficulty. The *vestaire* is here." And he relieved them of their hats and coats.

The Baron smiled as the footman preceded them into the rooms.

"It was easier than I thought."

"It is one of the advantages of being known to all the world," said Antoine.

"It has its drawbacks," replied the Baron.

Leading them through an elegantly furnished anteroom, fitted with lounges and little tables for smokers, the footman opened a large door and the two stepped into another room, of much larger size and brilliantly lighted. Their entry caused no attention. In the center of the room was a crowd of some scores of people, gathered round a large table. The scene brought Monte Carlo back to Antoine in a flash. The people were of just the same kind as those he had seen crowding round the tables there.

The two joined the crowd and looked over the shoulders of the people in front. There was a good deal of money on the green cloth.

"Baccarat," whispered the Baron. "And the young man who is holding the bank is, if I mistake not, our young friend."

"I can see his sainted father in every line of his face," said Antoine.

"Luck does not seem to be going too well with him."

It was soon evident that the play was high. Tardivel, a pale young man with short spiky hair that met in a point in the center of his forehead, was frowning darkly. Evidently he was losing, and quite as surely he did not like it.

The croupier's voice rang out monotonously, and Antoine thought of his feverish visit to Monte Carlo. Curious that his own gamble with fate should be so closely linked up with this young man's unhappy experience at the gaming tables. He began to feel almost

sorry for young Tardivel, for the strained look on his face showed how much he was feeling his ill luck. There was another shuffling of the money on the cloth, and the two notes and the few pieces of gold that still remained before the son of his enemy were swept up. The young man rose suddenly from his chair and left the table.

He walked to a buffet that stood at one end of the room and pouring out a large dose of cognac into a glass drank it off at a gulp. He stood there looking at the crowd that still surrounded the table with an expression of profound chagrin on his face.

"I should say that in his present mood that young man is capable of anything," observed the Baron.

After a moment the young man, his face still distorted with anger and vexation, moved slowly towards the door. He paused there irresolute and looked back at the crowd gathered round the table, then passed out.

"I would give anything to follow him," exclaimed Antoine. "It might mean everything."

The Baron plucked his moustache thoughtfully.

"So be it," he said. "I see no reason why the adventure should not be allowed to continue."

Tardivel was just getting his coat and hat as they came out of the gaming room. They waited until the door had closed on him. The Baron gave a gold piece to the footman, who thanked him profusely, and appeared with their coats and hats in a twinkling. He opened the door to let them out only a few seconds after Tardivel had descended the staircase.

As they gained the street they noticed three taxicabs drawn up in line before the door. A man in civilian dress stood surrounded by half a dozen policemen, to whom he was saying something in a low voice.

"A raid, *mon ami*," whispered the Baron. "I am

decidedly pleased that you suggested that moment for leaving. There are some things that need too much explanation."

VI

"THERE is our man, just turning into the Boulevard," said Antoine. "Quick, before we lose him in the crowd."

They hastened their steps. It was the hour when the theatres were closing, and the broad pavement was thronged with people. They caught sight of their quarry in the crowd, and to keep securely in touch with him it was necessary to follow at only a few yards' distance.

"It is the first time I have played detective," laughed the Baron. "I am indebted to you for a new sensation."

Tardivel walked along at a moderate pace, his head down, his hands thrust deep into his pockets. He crossed the Place de l'Opera, and a little further down the Boulevard turned into a side street and stopped outside the *Théâtre des Italiens.*

The *Italiens* was one of the smallest and smartest theatres in Paris. As young Tardivel reached it the lights at the front went out. He remained standing there for a few moments, looked at his watch, and then suddenly disappeared into a narrow passage that ran by the side of the theatre.

"That leads up to the stage door," said Antoine.

"*Cherches la femme,* eh? I am afraid our adventure does not venture too well. It is sufficiently banal that a young man of his type should go and wait at a stage door." The Baron's voice was not enthusiastic.

They were standing on the opposite side of the street. Antoine too felt a little discouraged. After all, he

could not expect an important personage like the Baron to wander vaguely all night round Paris at the heels of a dissoluté young man.

But then it might mean everything to him. It might save him, his colleagues, the paper. It was the only chance he had.

"Do not let us give up yet," he urged. "Think of that old spider sitting in his office at this moment with my fate in his hands—with documents relating to yourself, containing Heaven knows what. Stay here but one moment and I will go and pick up a taxicab. We can watch more comfortably in that, and it may be as well to have one ready."

"Agreed," said the Baron, and took out a cigar. Antoine walked rapidly to the boulevard and in a moment returned inside a taxi. The Baron entered, and they sat there smoking in the darkness of the cab.

Five minutes went, and to pass the time the Baron began to relate a curious adventure that had befallen him when exploring the Bowery district of New York.

Antoine, who was looking out of the window, interrupted him:

"There he is again. . . . And surely the Lady with him is La Belle Yolande!"

"La Belle Yolande!" exclaimed the Baron with sudden interest. "That would explain a lot." He leaned forward and looked out. "Yes it is indeed she. And so that is why young Tardivel tries so desperately to make money. Ah me! What fools these young men are. I wonder how many moths have singed their wings at that brilliant candle. And she has been burning quite a long time now."

The two, standing under the light of a street lamp, could be seen very plainly. The young man was obviously pleading, but there was a hard look on the face

of the famous beauty. They moved across the street towards the cab, talking rapidly, and the two men inside sat back in its shadows.

"I assure you," they heard Tardivel say, "I have tried every possible means. My father was like a stone. When I mentioned twenty thousand francs he laughed. And I've tried other ways, desperate ways. You've no idea what I've done." His voice was shaking with earnestness and anxiety.

"That is all the same to me," replied the beauty in calm, level tones. "My dear friend, you know how badly I need the money just now. What then is the use of coming to tell me that you have not found it? Naturally you have tried. But if you have not succeeded it is of no use to me, is it?" And she laughed, a maddening, rippling laugh.

"But Yolande, *ma bien aimée.*" The young man's voice was almost tearful now. "Be generous. You must not let it finish like this. I will try again. Give me another two days, another day. I will do it somehow, no matter what the cost. Give me the chance to try again."

"*Ecoutez, mon ami.* This is getting tiresome." Her swift cold words cut into his pleading like a whip lash. "Twenty thousand francs is not a very large sum. I have asked for ten times as much before now, and received it. And then, I did not ask for your attentions. You sought me out. I am sick of it all. If you love me so desperately, that is your affair. As for me, you bore me. Is that clear? If so please call me a cab."

"Ah!" There came a gasp from the young man. "And that is what you say when I cannot do what you want. I who have been in a fever for days past trying to get this money. I who have cheated at cards, who have been disgraced . . ."

"Imbecile! Did I ask you to cheat at cards, did I ask you to disgrace yourself!" The voice of the beautiful Yolande was intense with anger and irritation. "And now you come here like a schoolboy crying about your misfortunes. Ah, zut! If you only knew how I detest the sight of you." Her final tone was deliberately coarse and insulting.

"Miserable one," came the voice of young Tardivel, in a hoarse shout. "You shall pay for your heartlessness." And in the startled ears of the two listeners in the cab there rang the report of a pistol, and a shriek from Yolande.

The two were galvanized into instant activity. Antoine leaped out of the cab, with the Baron after him. On the ground lay Yolande. Antoine looked round quickly and saw the figure of the young man flying away down the quiet street.

He bent over the prostrate woman. Her face was very pale, but she was still breathing.

"Where is she hit?" asked the Baron.

"I cannot tell. . . . She is at any rate not dead."

"We shall have the police and the crowd here at any moment. . . . Look, people are running up already. I think, my friend, it will be wiser for both of us if we know nothing whatever of this affair." He spoke in a low tone so that the chauffeur should not hear.

"As you wish," said Antoine. He felt shaken by this tragic turn to the quarrel.

A moment before the street had been deserted, but now scores of people were hurrying down from the direction of the Boulevard. Amongst them Antoine noticed a policeman.

As he came up the policeman shot a quick glance at Antoine and the Baron before kneeling down at the side

of the woman. The crowd closed round the group, panting with excitement.

The policeman stood up again.

"This woman has been shot," he announced with extraordinary wisdom. "I heard the report of a firearm. Do you gentlemen know anything about it?" He spoke respectfully but firmly.

"We were sitting waiting here in this cab," said Antoine. "We heard the sound of a discussion between two people, and then the shot. When we jumped out the woman was lying here and a man was running away up the street there. You know the rest."

"We must take her to the nearest *pharmacie*. And you, Messieurs, must accompany me there. Please help me with her into the cab."

With some little difficulty and to the great excitement of the crowd this was done. The Baron thanked his stars that nobody called out his name. He did not seem to have been recognized.

The policeman sat holding Yolande, and just as the cab started away she stirred and gave a sign. The nearest chemist's shop open at that time was in the Rue Lafayette. They arrived there in a few minutes, and Yolande was carried into the shop by the policeman and the chauffeur. The matter was explained at once to the chemist who directed that she should be laid on a couch in the farther corner of the room. Round this he placed a screen and proceeded immediately to make an examination of the victim.

They waited there in the shop, while another crowd gathered outside. Antoine felt anxious and disturbed. This was an unfortunate business, not at all what he had expected. It spoiled his scheme too. Tardivel—the young miscreant!—would be arrested and the whole affair would be public property. The counter attack

he hoped to employ against the father was thus at once rendered ineffective.

The Baron was sitting on a chair, looking down at the floor. It was impossible to gather what he was thinking, but Antoine wondered whether he regretted his entry into that night's adventure.

Suddenly the chemist appeared from behind the screen.

"The lady is not touched anywhere," he announced. "Her assailant missed. She fainted from shock. A little restorative, and she will be all right." He mixed something in a glass and disappeared behind the screen again.

Antoine felt a tremendous relief. That lightened the business a good deal. He exchanged glances with the Baron whose face also was suddenly brighter.

The policeman, who had been looking exceedingly grave, seemed if anything a trifle disappointed. After an interval the chemist reappeared and said that the lady was now in a fit state to answer questions. The policeman, with an air of great importance, went behind the screen. They heard him ask for particulars of the affair, and as to who her assailant was.

"That I cannot tell you," came the voice of Yolande, now very quiet and gentle. "I do not know who he was. It was a strange young man—I cannot remember his face. He came and asked me for money. I told him I had none. He threatened me. I told him to go away. Then I heard a shot—and I remembered no more."

Antoine and the Baron looked at each other in amazement. It was a trait in the character of La Belle Yolande they would not have suspected.

Why should she shield him in this fashion? Antoine dwelt on the problem, while the voice of Yolande and

the policeman still came from behind the screen. The truth came into his head in a flash. . . . But, of course, that was it. Even La Belle Yolande could not suffer the odium of such a story. A young man ruins himself, cheats at cards, in order to find her money—and then because he has not been successful, she sends him away with every mark of disdain. No wonder she had made the swift decision to keep quiet. Why in such a case a Paris jury would sympathize openly with the young man. He would be instantly acquitted, amid warm expressions of sympathy.

But again, if La Belle Yolande kept quiet, then the story would be Antoine's, to use as he wished. The weapon he had looked for to use against Tardivel *père* was still in his hands, and, as a result of the shot, had become more powerful than ever he could have hoped.

The policeman came out from behind the screen, his notebook open in his hand.

"Messieurs, I shall require your names and addresses, in case there are developments of any kind."

"You understand that we are really quite strangers to the affair, and have no desire to be mixed up in it in any way," said the Baron.

"All the same, Monsieur, it will be necessary."

The Baron handed over his card. The policeman was much impressed as he read it, and became voluble on the spot.

"It is most unlikely, Monsieur le Baron, that you will be troubled further in any way. The lady has no idea as to who the man was—or so she says. At any rate, she seems quite disinclined to pursue the matter. I shall see her to her residence, as is my duty, and there I have little doubt the matter will end."

"If you wish you may use the taxicab that is now at the door," said the Baron. "And here is something for

the fare. . . . I trust the lady will soon be quite well again."

The policeman saluted most smartly, and did not bother Antoine for his name. They pushed out through the crowd, explained the situation to the chauffeur, on whom the Baron bestowed a liberal tip, and walked away down the street.

"Pouf! I am glad that is over," exclaimed the Baron. "And now what do you think of the situation. Is it good or bad?"

"But excellent." And Antoine began to explain.

"Pardon for one moment," interrupted the Baron. He looked at his watch. "One o'clock. After all that excitement I think we have earned our supper. Let us go to Maxim's, and we can talk it over there."

VII

The attack on La Belle Yolande caused a considerable sensation in Paris. The accounts of it that appeared in the newspapers varied in a remarkable degree. This was due to the fact that the victim obstinately refused to be interviewed, and so the newspapers were driven to making the best they could out of very little material. By keeping quiet, indeed, La Belle Yolande received a far bigger *réclame* than anything she might have achieved by deliberate self-advertisement.

One or two newspapers, making a shrewd guess, boldly asserted that the *attentat* had been made by a discarded admirer. Others stuck to the story that she had been the victim of a prowling *apache*, who had been bold enough to carry out his nefarious work in the immediate vicinity of the Boulevards.

Antoine chuckled to see that *Le Jour* was one of the newspapers which inclined to the theory that the outrage was due to some admirer, young or old, suffering from the pangs of jealous or unrequited love. It showed conclusively that Tardivel *père* was a stranger to his son's liaison. The shock when he heard the truth would therefore be all the greater.

And one result of Yolande's singular wish to avoid publicity—extraordinary indeed in the case of a popular revue "star"—was that Paris had a keen desire to know what was behind this little affair, and who really was the man. The public was always interested in La Belle Yolande, and this was much more palpitating than the mere periodical disappearance of her jewels.

All this mystery and interest strengthened Antoine's hand, and it was with a feeling of high confidence that he wrote a letter to M. Tardivel, asking politely that he might see him on the day following.

In the meantime he had been anything but idle. At the earliest possible moment he had put Durand on the track of young Tardivel. Twenty-four hours later Durand sent a telegram from Geneva. It said in a spontaneous and amusing cypher which Antoine had no difficulty in understanding, that the quarry was staying there at a small hotel under the name of Lawrence and that, until further orders, wherever he went Durand would follow him.

M. Tardivel's courteous reply to Antoine's letter was received within a few hours.

So that on the afternoon following Antoine once more found himself sitting near M. Tardivel's big desk, and smoking another of his excellent cigars. M. Tardivel was as urbane and good humored as before. Again Antoine felt a certain difficulty in realizing what sinister impulses lay behind that smooth

manner. But that disappeared the moment M. Tardivel dropped generalities and, in his own peculiar fashion, came down to business.

"I am glad to see that you decided to see me again before the week was up," he said with his friendly smile. "I presume, M. Poiret, that you have seen your way to fall in with my suggestion?"

"On the contrary."

Antoine's confident tone, as much as the matter of what he said, caused M. Tardivel considerable astonishment.

"Then do I understand that you wish me to proceed at once to extremes?" His tone was slightly acid. The iron hand was peeping out rather soon.

"That is as you wish. But if you do I am sure you will be very sorry for it. May I ask you if you read 'The Notes of the Day' in *La Lumière* yesterday? I see you did not. Then perhaps you will cast your eyes over this paragraph?" And before the astonished eyes of the powerful director of *Le Jour* Antoine placed a few lines of print neatly pasted on to a piece of paper.

The joke of having his own methods applied to him did not seem to strike M. Tardivel as amusing. Then he looked at the paragraph and read:

> "The truth that lies behind the mysterious attack on a certain well-known actress of the lighter stage would startle Paris could it but know the full story. And especially would it disturb a notable Boulevard personality whose cynical exploitation of other people's private affairs seems to close his eyes to the fact that errors may be committed very near home."

There was a steely glitter in M. Tardivel's eyes as

he looked at Antoine. His mouth was hard set, and the mask of good humor had disappeared completely.

"I fail to see what connection this has with me," he said harshly.

"It has a very intimate and personal connection with you," said Antoine easily. "And without employing your own elegant rhodomontade I will give you an outline of the story that lies behind the mystery of La Belle Yolande. It concerns your son. For some time past he has been infatuated with this siren. He could not obtain sufficient money from you for her needs. In order to acquire this money he cheated at cards and was expelled ignominiously from one of the best clubs in Paris. As another desperate measure he frequented gambling hells and lost there whatever money remained to him. Infuriated by the reproaches and the attitude of La Belle Yolande he shot at her—how he managed to miss I don't know. But I do know several people who were witnesses of the affair. He has fled Paris—you probably know that he has disappeared—and at the present moment I have a trusted friend watching his hiding place. Those are the main facts behind the mystery of the attack on La Belle Yolande . . . I hope they interest you. They would certainly interest the police."

Antoine spoke slowly and incisively. The change that came over his antagonist's face as he proceeded was startling. As M. Tardivel had so often smilingly asserted, every man was vulnerable somewhere. And the cynical old scoundrel had his own weak spot. He knew his son was a scapegrace, but he loved him. The revelation—he knew it was true as he listened to Antoine—overwhelmed him. The blow went home with crushing force.

By the time Antoine had finished M. Tardivel's face

was pale and haggard. Gone was every trace of that smiling self-confidence, that jaunty but ruthless power which had so angered and appalled Antoine at their first meeting. Suddenly he dropped his head down and covered his face with his hand.

"*Mon pauvre Gaston—mon pauvre petit Gaston,*" Antoine heard him murmur. Antoine's triumph was complete. But he found it in his heart to be sorry for the old man who for the first time in his life had felt the heavy hand of another, and that through his son.

Then M. Tardivel, with a supreme effort, pulled himself together and walked to his private cabinet. He drew from it the drawer Antoine had seen before, brought it back to his desk, and took out the envelope bearing Antoine's name, and without a word handed it over.

"One moment," said Antoine, and reaching over he deftly abstracted the packet that lay next to it and placed it in his pocket. "I wish to return this to the person it concerns."

M. Tardivel looked dumbly at him, but did not move. Then an audacious idea came to Antoine. Behind M. Tardivel's big desk a bright fire was burning in an open grate. Swiftly picking up the whole drawer he ran across to the fire and with one twist emptied out that store of unhappy secrets—the stealthy records of men who at some time in their lives had stepped aside for a moment from the straight and narrow path.

There came a strangled cry from M. Tardivel. As Antoine faced him again the frantic man made a rush for the fireplace, but Antoine held him back firmly. And together they watched the bonfire.

Antoine stirred it with his foot, so that the flames licked up again with a rush.

"See all those unhappy secrets escaping up the chimney," he said. "Your son's goes with them. . . . And there is a maxim for life, M. Tardivel, which I like better than yours. It is very bourgeois and simple —live and let live. I trust you will be able to adopt it."

And picking up his hat Antoine went out.

VII

The same evening he sat again with the Baron at dinner. The Baron was holding some faded yellow letters in his hand.

"And to think," he said, "that this was the secret he was holding over my head—this little episode of youth. I was about the same age as young Tardivel then. And she—well she was as beautiful and cruel as La Belle Yolande—more so. But I did not shoot her. No! I threatened to shoot myself. I wrote the most impassioned, the most desperate, the most wildly imploring letters that youth ever penned. It is all down here, in faded black and white. I read them an hour ago, and I was amazed. *Enfin*, I was very young."

The Baron looked at his glass for a moment, and seemed to be following the bubbles that were rising in the golden wine.

"I was quite sure that I should never get over it then . . . But Time has its compensations. I had forgotten most of that episode, but the letters have brought it all back. I would not part with them for anything now. Bless that dear and sinister old man for preserving them . . . Some years later, by the way, she married the manager of a second-class touring company. I believe she now looks after the wardrobe

at a small theatre in Marseilles . . . Ah me! *Quelle chienne de vie!*"

Antoine was silent.

The Baron looked at his glass again, and this time emptied it.

"I assure you, *mon cher* Poiret, life becomes much more amusing as you get old. You must come to my next supper."

CHAPTER V

THE STUDIO IN THE RUE TARTARIN

I

THE Directors of *La Lumière* sat in council.

"Il n'y à pas a dire," said Antoine. "The paper is dull. It is true that all the others just now are also dull. But cannot we find something out of the common? Morissot, will politics give us nothing?"

"Bah!" exclaimed Morissot. "There is nothing more to write about. I have attacked this Cabinet until I am sick. They have not even the energy to lose their tempers. I have heaped odium on them—and they do not respond. One cannot fight with a jelly fish . . . It is disheartening."

Antoine's eyes twinkled.

"And yet less than a month ago you forced a Minister to resign his portfolio."

"True—but he was a poor thing. He ought never to have been even in this Cabinet."

Antoine fingered his little pointed beard.

"And you, Bourdot. Does the world of Society give us nothing out of the common? Are there no scandals?"

"But little, I fear. It is the dull season. There is a duel coming off shortly between the Comte de Chanclair and the husband of a lady to whom he has been paying the warmest attentions."

"Oh, but the Count makes a hobby of duels of that kind."

"True . . . There is nothing else that I know of."

"It is incredible—Paris without a scandal. Can it be, Morissot, that your campaign for national purity has at last taken effect and that life henceforth is to be perfectly good, but quite dull?"

"Heaven forbid!" said Morissot.

"There is of course the old scandal of the streets," said Bourdot. "It is always with us, but it is getting even worse. You have seen the huge hole they are now digging in front of the Opera? They are erecting cranes, steam boilers, Heaven knows what, and all this in the busiest and most prominent crossing in Paris. The traffic there ties itself into knots and cannot get out again. Yesterday in a cab it took me twelve minutes to cross the road there."

"True, it is villainous," put in Morissot. "The Place de la Concorde looks like Switzerland. Paris ought to lay itself out to attract those English people who go mountaineering. It is the same all over the city—ditches and holes, boilers and palisades, cliffs and ravines. My own street has been 'up' for five months, and nobody knows why. No work is ever done there." Morissot was rapidly working himself up into a passion. "Occasionally I see a workman eating his dinner, and that is all. He has a nice comfortable shed to live in, and a fire to keep him warm. Perhaps he will never shift, and I shall never be able to get a cab to my door. If he decides to stop in my street forever, who is there to prevent him? Answer me that!"

Antoine shook with laughter at Morissot's rapidly mounting indignation.

"*Tiens*, but that is a droll idea—a workman stopping there in his little house forever—a sort of hermit

of the streets. It would be a jolly life. I should like it."

"But it is really no joke," Morissot went on. "Somebody drives two stakes into the ground, throws a rope across a street, puts up a notice '*Rue Barrée*' and there you are. Nobody knows why it is barred. Vegetables might grow on the pavement, rabbits might disport themselves in the road and it would not be surprising. And so the inhabitants remain for months, even years, cut off from the rest of humanity by a notice board in the daytime and a red lamp at night. And this is going on all over Paris."

Allowing for a certain exaggeration which was natural to him, Morissot's description of the streets of Paris was a fairly accurate one. For the past year or so a sort of street rash seemed to have broken out in the city. Everywhere were to be found excavations and heaps of rubbish, with ugly palisading and often huge *chantiers,* or sheds, in which the workmen conducted their operations. Many of these were tucked away in side streets, where nobody but those immediately concerned noticed them. But others were erected in the busiest or even most beautiful spots in Paris, and tourists who had come from afar to see *La Ville Lumière* gazed at famous buildings through a haze of steam and smoke from puffing boilers.

Latterly the plague had got worse than ever. Streets were ripped up, relaid, ripped up again and left. No doubt there was some reason behind most of these disembowelings and eruptions, but it was hard to find. The Press had kept up a running fire of sarcasm, but this had produced no effect. It needed something very drastic to bring the City Fathers to their senses. So far this had not been done.

"If we could only hit on a really good idea to bring

out the ridiculous side of this, Paris would be really grateful," said Antoine after some further conversation. "The difficulty is to focus general attention on a plague which everybody is more or less getting used to."

He stroked his little beard and thought hard, a far-away look in his eyes. Suddenly his features wrinkled up in a merry smile. A chuckle escaped him, and then he leaned back in his chair, his hands to his sides, and laughed long and heartily at the idea that had come to him.

"You have evidently struck something good," said Morissot when Antoine's merriment had subsided. "What is it? We are impatient to hear."

"It is a beautiful idea," chuckled Antoine, wiping his eyes. "Listen. . . ." But another laugh bubbled up, and he relapsed into his secret joy again.

"*Ciel!*" cried Bourdot. "What is all this about? Quick! We cannot sit here looking on while you enjoy it all alone."

"Patience, my friends. You shall know as soon as I can tell you," and, his words interrupted by chuckles of merriment, Antoine very briefly outlined his plan.

"Superb! But it is a stroke of genius," cried Bourdot when they had heard it. "Oh, how my Duchesses will laugh. I shall have to tell the story again and again. They will point out how this sort of thing can only happen under a Republic. And won't the poor suffering public enjoy it!"

Morissot in his different way was also enthusiastic. And Antoine was still emitting little trills of laughter as they went out to lunch to talk the matter over more fully.

II

"THE point is to choose a really suitable street," said Antoine over the coffee. "It must be of good tone, quiet, and yet in the heart of the town. And not too long. We must not immobilize a whole quarter of Paris. I will take a little walk this afternoon and find the thing we want."

"But it must be a street which will cause a considerable dislocation of traffic by being closed," said Morissot. "Else these animals of City Councillors will not see the point."

"Exactly. The only difficulty I foresee is in getting the workmen necessary to build the chantier, and in making them think they really are working for the Municipal Council. However, that can be overcome. Perhaps they would appreciate the joke."

Bourdot laughed into his coffee.

"*Et puis?*"

"And then Lemaire comes into it. The shed once finished, all complete, with a good north light, I shall wire him to say that I have a splendid studio in Paris at my disposal, and that if he likes to come and use it he may. Of course, he will fly back like the wind. He is dying to see Paris again."

"By the way, what became of that strange being after the affair of *La Douloureuse?*" inquired Morissot. "You told us you were looking after him, but you did not say how."

"Lemaire is strange, as you say, but he is a good fellow. He agreed to put himself in my hands. I sent him down to Brittany to sketch and paint to his heart's content. He lives at a little *pension* in charge of an excellent woman I know. His board is paid for

him, and I allow him ten francs pocket money and half a bottle of absinthe a week. A doctor who saw him said that it was better not to try and break him from the habit altogether. I have had the best reports of him. He does not even drink his half bottle now, and is much better in every way. . . . But he is pining for Paris."

"And you think he will do what you want?"

"Do it! He is all on fire to serve me. More than that, the idea will appeal to him. He will dance with joy. To live in a commodious studio in the middle of a Paris street—a studio with a beautiful big north light, and with every convenience—to live there calmly and peacefully, far from the noise of traffic and yet with the Boulevards only a moment away—oh, but he will regard it as Heaven. He will paint as he has never painted before. Since the dawn of time no artist will have had such a studio . . . and by the beard of the President, he shall paint a picture for the Salon. That is an idea! He has talent, *voyez vous*. He has exhibited there several times. . . . And will not that tickle Paris—a picture painted for the Salon in a street *chantier* erected by *La Lumière!* Oh, we will make these ancient City Fathers sit up . . . and in the meantime we will run a hot campaign on the disgraceful eruptions of the streets. We will point out that it is open to anybody to put up a board or a red lamp, build a hut and make a street his own. . . . Oh, but we will have some fun with them. Wait until Paris hears the story."

"They may send us all to jail for it," said Morissot.

"It will be worth it. We shall be martyrs. You will have a statue, Morissot."

"With an inscription: 'He was the foe of Cabinet Ministers and all other scoundrels,'" said Bourdot.

"If the studio is to be as comfortable as you say, I shall write some of my political articles there," said Morissot.

"And I will invite some of my Duchesses to tea," added Bourdot.

And the three Directors went on laughing and joking in the very best of good humors.

Antoine went off alone on his quest for a suitable site for the studio. He found exactly what he wanted in the Rue Tartarin, a short but dignified street running off the luxurious and populous Rue Royale. It was thus in the heart of Paris, and in the very best quarter.

The Rue Tartarin contained some excellent shops, and also a very well-known restaurant, Boulanger's, famous for oysters.

"It could not be better," said Antoine to himself, as he strolled along. "Boulanger will be furious—every client will have to get out and walk. But he will know it is no use protesting. One must expect this sort of thing in Paris. And if Lemaire is fond of oysters he could not be better placed." He laughed so heartily to himself that people turned round to look at him.

Antoine sauntered back to the office to report on his choice.

"It is daring," said Bourdot, thinking of the stream of cabs and motor cars that rolled up to Boulanger's every evening.

"Ah, bah! We must have the best," said Antoine. "Is *La Lumière* to be content with a small back street? Ten thousand times no! This affair to succeed must be *chic*. I thought for a moment of taking the Rue de la Paix. But I am afraid that even in Paris we should be discovered before the studio was more than half

built. The shopkeepers there would raise such a howl that somebody would have to take notice of them."

"Antoine Poiret, stealer of streets," murmured Morissot. "It will sound well in the Assize Court."

"We should make a very attractive trio in the dock," said Antoine. "But nobody would dare to prosecute. It would be funnier than any farce ever seen at the Palais Royal."

III

The building of the studio proved to be a more delicate matter to arrange than Antoine had imagined. A number of tentative efforts showed him that he would have to walk very warily indeed. The scheme would collapse at the beginning if the slightest wind of the enterprise got abroad.

Chance favored him when it seemed as though the most careful and discreet strategy must fail. A certain individual named Grosjean, a building contractor in a small way, had recently taken up the question of the lack of accommodation for the housing of the working classes. He had received a number of families under his protection, and with a following of horny-handed toilers, their wives, a plentiful supply of young children and a small supply of furniture, had started out on various pilgrimages round Paris to find shelter for his brood.

The adventures of Monsieur Grosjean, who was an excellent man at heart, if a little peculiar in his methods of propaganda, had been many and various. He had taken possession of empty houses, and been ejected from them by the police at the instance of outraged landlords. On one cold winter's night, with a follow-

ing of about forty, of all ages, he had boldly invaded a police station. The police were taken completely by surprise, and once in the cozy interior, with his charges grouped round a cheery stove, Grosjean had dared the police to turn them out into the street. After a great deal of heated argument, in which Grosjean came off anything but second best, the police officials surrendred to the extent of allowing the Grosjean family to stop there the night. And on another occasion a kind-hearted Duke, meeting the Grosjean procession in a street off the Faubourg St. Germain, had given all of them food and shelter for the night in his commodious mansion and provided their leader with a sum of money to help in his campaign.

The idea of invoking the aid of Grosjean came to Antoine as a happy flash of inspiration. He immediately sent out Durand, investigator of crimes and mysteries, and ambassador extraordinary in many delicate affairs of *La Lumière*, to get in touch with this practical but embarrassing philanthropist.

Durand returned with Grosjean within two hours, and Antoine was soon deep in conversation with the visitor. Grosjean was a portly little man, with eyes that twinkled with kindliness and good humor. But it was quite evident that he was immensely serious on the subject nearest his heart.

"You and I, Monsieur Grosjean, are in a sense brothers, if I may say so," began Antoine. "We are both fighting against the stupidity and short-sightedness of officialdom. The bureaucrat and the jack-in-office, swathed in red tape, are our common enemies."

The eyes of the visitor lit up with joy at the sound of these splendid and inspiring phrases.

"Alas, that there are so few like us, Monsieur. You cannot conceive the difficulties with which I have to

contend. Would you believe that only two days ago a landlord denounced me as a cunning rascal and a dangerous person—I, whose sole wish is to provide happiness for others. And this simply because I was just about to take possession of a house that was empty!"

"*C'est incroyable!* M. Grosjean, I am convinced that you are the man to help me in a certain scheme which will make all Parisians happier." And as briefly as possible Antoine described the work he wanted done.

"It is against the law," said Grosjean, when he had heard.

"But surely you are the last person to care for that! You take possession of houses which belong to rapacious landlords. May I not for a little time take possession of a street which is free to all?"

"True. As for me I care little for the law. Whatever they do to me will only advertise my cause. But tell me, Monsieur—how will your scheme help our fellow-men?"

"*Parbleu!* It will make Paris a happier city, and that is what we are both striving for, is it not? You in one way, I in another. I will admit that of the two your cause is the grander, the more noble. But I also in my humble way wish to do good. We are both enemies of the same scourge. The lack of care and foresight, which makes it necessary for you to search for lodgings for your *protégés* is responsible also for this plague of eruptions and excavations in our streets, for this ceaseless ravaging of peaceful and inoffensive thoroughfares. The money which is spent on causing the one evil could be far better spent on abolishing the other. Is it not so?"

"But evidently, Monsieur. You state the case most eloquently and convincingly."

"Then if you do this work for me you shall be paid

half in advance; you shall be guaranteed against any legal expenses that may follow, and in addition you shall have two thousand francs for the cause you have so much at heart. Is it agreed, M. Grosjean?"

"It is agreed, and willingly, Monsieur. You are most generous. . . . I will not hide from you the fact that of late my business has considerably suffered. This work comes at a most convenient moment."

"Then there is nothing to do but to start at once. In my name you will take possession of the Rue Tartarin at the earliest possible moment. You will understand, M. Grosjean, that discretion is vital. But a little audacity, also, works wonders. It is the first step that counts."

"And what is that?"

"At one end of the street you drive in two stakes, stretch a rope across and hang on it a board with the legend, '*Rue Barrée.*' That is a sacred phrase in Paris. Nobody questions it, not even the President of the Republic. At the other end of the street you do the same. From that moment the street is ours, and we may go on with the work in all tranquillity."

"It is enough, Monsieur. You shall have drawings and an estimate for the building this very evening. And I will be discretion itself. Perhaps it will be as well for me not to appear too prominently in the matter. Many of the police know me only too well by now. But I have an excellent foreman, who will go on with the work with every confidence. He will be quite under the impression that it is being done for the City of Paris."

"*C'est parfait, M. Grosjean.*"

"*Au 'voir et merci,* Monsieur." And the kindly protector of the poor hurried off to put the work into execution, his eyes agleam with excitement.

IV

The chief danger of discovery in the building of the studio lay in the rapidity with which M. Grosjean had the work pushed on.

The shopkeepers of the Rue Tartarin were intensely disgusted when they found that they, too, were to be victims of the rage for excavation. But they were agreeably surprised at the celerity with which the work, in its early stages at any rate, was carried out. It was generally agreed that a new spirit seemed to have come into civic enterprise.

Within a few hours after seeing Antoine, M. Grosjean had staked out his claim. Most artistically he, at the same time, had a few square yards of wood blocks pulled up, and a brasier planted near the heap of debris. It was a scene to satisfy the expert, a spot at once sacred to authority. Nobody from that moment would have dreamed of interfering with the course of operations.

Within a week the studio was finished. It was an unassuming but solid structure of wood. It was divided into two apartments—one half as a living room for Lemaire and the other as his studio. This latter was provided with a splendid window, and no artist could desire more comfortable quarters.

At various times the Directors of *La Lumière* passed down the Rue Tartarin, and noted with much satisfaction the encouraging progress of the work. And in the meantime Antoine made full arrangements for Lemaire's occupation.

He collected a camp bed, a small stove, a lamp, a number of chairs and various other necessary articles of furniture. Lemaire came back to Paris, joyful at his release from exile. His eye was clear and his color

healthy. He was not the same man whom Antoine had first seen bowed down by the weight of his secret possession of *La Douloureuse* and ravaged by his over-indulgence in absinthe.

Lemaire roared with delight when he heard what was required of him.

"*Ah, non, mais c'est admirable!* I will paint the picture of my life there. . . . And fancy living within one minute of the Boulevards after the silence, the melancholy of Brittany! But I promise you I shall be happy."

"Then get your things together—your easel and whatever other little affairs you will require. I have collected some furniture for you. Here is the key of the studio. You are free of one of the most desirable residences in Paris. And you will move in to-night."

"An hour's preparation and I am ready."

"There are one or two little points to be mentioned. You will have to see to the red lamps at night—two at each end of the street. And it will be well not to be seen too much in the daytime. When you do come out you must wear the rough clothes of a workman. You will be able to keep a suit of clothes elsewhere to change into, when you wish to go about Paris. . . . You do not mind this, mon ami?"

"Not in the slightest. . . . It is part of the fun. And do I not owe you more than I can repay?"

"*Allons, donc!* That is nothing. . . . Then you move into your new residence to-night—at midnight or a little after when all is quiet. Your things can be packed on a handcart. I have a man who will take them. If the matter is done swiftly and with confidence no suspicion will be excited. And once in possession you will be able to go on painting your picture without fear of interruption."

Shortly after midnight Antoine and Bourdot walked down the Boulevard at a discreet distance behind a handcart piled high with the furniture of the new home. A man hired for the occasion pulled the cart, and by his side walked Lemaire, dressed in rough clothes .

The handcart turned into the Rue Tartarin. Lemaire and the man bent to pass beneath the rope that barred the street, and a moment later Lemaire was fitting the key into the lock of his dwelling. A policeman halting at the corner stood to look for a moment at what was happening, and passed on.

The unloading of the furniture took only a few minutes. The man came away with the handcart, and a moment or so later Antoine and Bourdot saw the glimmer of a light through the studio window.

"He is installed," said Antoine.

"It is a pity we cannot have a housewarming," said Bourdot.

They walked casually down the pavement past the studio and could hear Lemaire busying himself inside. He was whistling a cheerful tune to himself. It was Mimi's song from "La Bohême."

"That will never do," said Antoine. "The intelligent pedestrian who passed here at midnight and heard snatches of grand opera from a *chantier* would be curious immediately. It is hardly the sort of thing one expects from a night watchman. . . . I will tell him."

Antoine after a careful look round stepped to the door and rapped. The door opened and Lemaire's head appeared.

"*Tiens, c'est vous!* Are you coming in?"

"No, mon ami. But softly with that whistling. Do you realize that '*La Bohême*' is hardly the sort of

music that a workman would indulge in? Remember the part you are playing."

"I am so excited I could sing aloud. The smell of Paris again, at night—ah, it is wonderful!"

"It is a charming thought, mon ami, but you must contain your transports. Remember discretion is necessary."

"You are right. I will be on my guard. . . . You are sure you will not come in?" Lemaire seemed most anxious to play the host in his new residence.

"Not to-night. Another time. And do not forget the lamps. . . . *Bonne nuit.*"

"*Bonne nuit.*" And Lemaire closed his door.

Antoine chuckled as he rejoined Bourdot.

"Is it not absurd! There is Lemaire settling down for the night in his habitation, like any good citizen. One can fancy him marrying and buying a piano, and bringing up a family in the Rue Tartarin. It will be a good joke if it is not spoiled. And now, do we go soberly home to bed or shall we celebrate Lemaire's homecoming by having some supper?"

"Supper is an excellent idea. We cannot do better than go over the way to Boulanger's. It will be some slight atonement for the trouble our scheme will cause him."

They found the main room well filled with people supping after the theatre. They ordered their own meal and discussed the people present. Most of them were known to Bourdot and he was kept busy exchanging bows and smiles.

Boulanger himself came up to say a word to them. He inquired solicitously as to the supper and the wine. And then:

"You see that the Rue Tartarin is now beleaguered —cut off from the rest of Paris. You have seen this

structure before my very door? In a week or two there will be no doubt a yawning cavern. Is it not infamous that Paris should be so torn about?"

They agreed earnestly that he was right.

"It is you, Messieurs, who ought to stop all this. Only the Press can do it. Otherwise there will soon not be a street to walk in."

"We are doing our best," said Antoine. "Have you not seen that nearly every day *La Lumière* has something to say on the subject? . . . And one of these days Paris will hear something which will be a surprise, I promise you."

"Ah! excellent. And the sooner the better." And Boulanger departed, well pleased.

"*Tiens*, look who comes here," said Bourdot a moment later.

It was none other than the Baron Pex, Antoine's companion in the little adventure of Monsieur Tardivel. The Baron looked slowly round the room, seemed disappointed at not finding somebody for whom he was seeking and sat down alone at a table. In doing so he caught sight of Antoine, and saluted cordially. Antoine went over at once to shake hands.

Antoine suggested early that the Baron should join them. He consented readily.

They sat there till late. The Baron was in a happy mood and talked very entertainingly. More wine had been brought, and as he sipped it Antoine's heart warmed strongly to the Baron. What an excellent friend he had been in that little affair of blackmail!

There came a moment when, hardly conscious at first of what he was saying, Antoine told the Baron of the little surprise he was preparing for Paris. The Baron listened with laughing amazement, and roared with delight at the story.

"And this Lenaire, he is there now in that building I noticed as I came in?"

"He took possession only an hour or so ago. By now, I trust, he is sleeping peacefully in his bed."

"Name of a name, it is the best thing I have heard for years." And the Baron laughed again, until the tears came to his eyes. "But there will be trouble some day. Let us hope the authorities will see the fun of it as keenly as I do. The picture will cause a sensation at the Salon—if it is ever finished."

They parted shortly after, and the Baron prayed Antoine to keep him in touch with the developments of the plot.

"Was it wise to tell the Baron, do you think?" asked Bourdot a few moments later as they were rolling along in a taxicab.

"Oh, but he is quite safe. You heard him say that he would not mention it to anybody. . . . And think how much we owe to him in that little affair with old Tardivel. But for the Baron, mon ami, you and I would have long ago seen the last of *La Lumière*."

"True. But the Baron enjoyed the joke so much. . . . It is very hard to keep a really good joke to oneself."

V

Bourdot's remark, as it proved, was almost uncannily wise. The Baron cherished quite a warm feeling for Antoine and the paper which he had been instrumental in saving. He was also a man of honor. But while he would have locked the secret of a scandal or a crime in his breast as within a casket of steel the joke of the Rue Tartarin proved too much for his self-control.

The next day he told it—under the strictest reserve of secrecy—to his friend Count Ciro de Bonauvent, complete with artist, camp bed, picture for the Salon and the rest. And before the afternoon was out Count Ciro found that his secret tortured him so much that he must, for the sake of his own peace of mind, impart it to the Marquis de Rochenoir, enjoining him at the same time to keep the strictest privacy in the matter. And so within a week, to the accompaniment of a chorus of laughter, the story traveled all round the inner and most exclusive circle of *le Tout Paris*.

It gained immeasurably as it traveled. A perfectly appointed bathroom was added to Lemaire's household amenities, his humble furniture became the rarest Louis Quinze, and as for his painting it was understood that a bevy of beautiful models sat for him every day from ten to four, reclining luxuriously on tiger-skin rugs.

And as the delirious history passed from mouth to mouth, the scene of this remarkable adventure, as unaccountably happens in these cases, flitted about from one place to another.

In its highly improved form the story at last reached the ears of Monsieur Labiche, Prefect of Police. There was very little in the way of gossip or scandal which did not come to his ears sooner or later. The secret police of Paris had its "agents" in every quarter, and in every possible walk of life. They were actuated by all sorts of motives, and only a small proportion of them desired money for their services. And many an indiscreet chatterer in an old-world salon would have been amazed to know that his amusing *potins*, amiable, cynical or malicious, were not many hours later in the keeping of the head of the police.

Monsieur Labiche in his long years of office had heard many surprising stories, and knew as well as any

man that the strangest things could happen in Paris. But he flattered himself that he could generally distinguish the likely from the impossible. And he roared with laughter when he received the report of a fantastic studio somewhere in the Champs Elysées.

"Listen to this," he said to his confidential secretary. "Some farceur is trying to make fun of us." And he read out the report. The Secretary entered into the mood of his chief and laughed joyously with him.

"People don't do that sort of thing, even in Paris," said the Prefect.

But he began to think differently when, in quick succession, reports came to hand of luxurious studios in the Boulevard des Italiens, the Rue St. Antoine, the Avenue de la Grande Armée, the Quai Voltaire, the Place de l'Opera and other quarters of the city.

"*Tonnerre!*" he exclaimed. "Somebody seems to have been scattering illicit studios out of a balloon. But there is evidently one somewhere. This must be seen to."

The Prefect was one of those rare public servants who likes to see things done for himself. He had a hundred matters to attend to every day, but in his moments of leisure his chief delight was to wander alone round Paris at night dressed as inconspicuously as possible, and poke his nose into all sorts of places where he was not expected. He had run into some very remarkable, and even dangerous adventures in consequence.

The story of the mysterious and ubiquitous studio, with its bathroom and tiger-skin rugs, excited both his curiosity and his sense of humor. It would be a shame, he reflected, to put it into the hands of some over-zealous Inspector, who, in his worthy desire to bring

transgressors to justice, would entirely overlook the finer points of the situation. It was a little matter he would look into himself at the earliest opportunity. In the meantime he collected all the reports that came in of the mysterious studio.

VI

After some thought Lemaire had decided that the subject of his picture should be "Cleopatra receiving Mark Antony."

In his ardent youth this romantic story of ancient Egypt had fascinated him, and he had then made a large number of sketches and studies for a painting that was to be the *chef d'œuvre* of his career. He had never started on the picture, and decided that now was the time. The choice of this subject also disposed of the necessity of employing models, a matter which he wisely saw would present considerable difficulties during the daylight hours in the Rue Tartarin.

Lemaire began by putting his house in order. With deft touches he transformed the interior of the studio. His living-room he decorated with striking posters, picked up at various times from vendors on the Boulevards at a few sous each. With a few odd bits of curtain and carpet, some plaster casts and various examples of his own work he made the studio look very much like any other studio. There were no tiger-skin rugs available, but Lemaire felt very satisfied with the decorations as he looked round.

Then with a canvas of large dimensions on his easel he settled down to the painting of "Cleopatra receiving Mark Antony."

He worked in the greatest happiness, with the sounds of his beloved Paris all around him. The shrill horn

of the itinerant chair-mender filled his studio with music. He could hear all details of the perennial quarrel between the "chasseur" and the door porter over at Boulanger's. Often he caught snatches of conversation from people passing on the pavements—very intimate snatches sometimes. A Parisian to his bones, this nearness to the life of the great city while himself remaining unseen thrilled him. It was as though he had the cap of invisibility amongst his fellows.

"No artist ever had such a studio," he exulted. He put all his soul into the work, and rejoiced to see the superb figure of Cleopatra, reclining on a couch of gold, growing before his eyes.

As for Antoine he found himself for once compelled to play a waiting game. Lemaire had told him that at the rate he was now working the picture would be finished in a month. There was nothing to be done but to wait until that time was over, and then let Paris know through *La Lumière* the fantastic story of the Rue Tartarin.

He paid one nocturnal visit to Lemaire and found the artist most comfortably installed, and in the happiest frame of mind. A lamp burned brightly on the table, near which was a comfortable canvas deck chair. Lemaire pointed to an open book.

"I am renewing acquaintance with some of the books I read in youth—'Notre Dame de Paris' you see. Do you know that this is the most delightful period I have ever spent in my life. I work furiously by day, and read at night. My mind is at rest, everything is calm and peaceful . . . . Take the easy chair. I have some passable red wine here."

Antoine lighted a cigar, Lemaire filled a huge pipe with shaggy "caporal" and the two sat there talking

happily in the glow of the lamp light. Antoine found that there was something wonderfully soothing and friendly in the atmosphere of this wooden retreat.

"*Vraiment*, I envy you, Lemaire, it is most pleasant here . . . I must come again, and bring Bourdot and Morissot. We will put some things in a bag and have a little supper. What do you say?"

"It would be delightful. When shall you come?"

"It will be some time this week. But can your clock be right? Two in the morning! I must be going." And after Lemaire had gone outside to survey the street and see that nobody was about Antoine took his departure.

It was two days later that Bourdot came in to him with a serious face.

"You have heard the news? That story of the Rue Tartarin is all over Paris."

"*Comment!*" Antoine bounded from his chair. "How has that happened?"

"I fancy the Baron has been a little indiscreet. It is a huge joke, and everybody is laughing already. I heard it in three places to-day. But it is all mixed up in the most extraordinary fashion." And Bourdot told him all he had heard.

The serious look went from Antoine's face as Bourdot proceeded. When the story was finished Antoine was shaking with mirth.

"But it is no laughing matter," protested Bourdot.

"How can I help laughing—marble bathroom, tiger-skin rugs, afternoon teas, beautiful lady visitors and a phantom studio, that flits about all over Paris. What could be better . . . And perhaps that explains why we have not heard from the police or somebody. Either they don't believe it or they are busy exploring every chantier in Paris trying to find the right one."

"Oh well, so long as it pleases you."

"Why not? We must not let it worry us. It is a development of the joke. Anything may come of it. And you say that Paris is already amused. It is something . . . By the way, I have promised Lemaire that the three of us will go to supper with him. I spent some hours there two nights ago. It was most amusing. We had better go to-night, and make the most of the time. I have told Morissot."

"By all means. Who provides the supper?"

"We do, of course. I am having something put together at the *Bonne Bière*."

"Good. By the way, you know I suppose that the young King of Calabria is visiting Paris incognito. I believe he is having a very good time with our friend the Baron. . . . Pity I can't describe their adventures. They would be so much more interesting than the conventional record of an official visit, *hein?*"

Antoine smiled. "Till to-night then," he said. "Lemaire will be ready to receive visitors at twelve o'clock."

Shortly after midnight the directorate of *La Lumière* descended from a taxicab at the further end of the Rue Tartarin. Each of the three carried a parcel under his arm. They walked along the street, waited until a party of people had passed into Boulanger's and knocked at the door of the studio. Lemaire opened it at once.

Morissot and Bourdot, who had not seen the place in its magnificence, looked round them with appreciation and amusement. Lemaire was delighted at their praise of his interior.

"I have set up the table in the studio," he said. "We can dine there and drink our coffee in here afterwards."

"Then let us undo these parcels and begin at once," said Antoine.

Roast chicken, salads, champagne, liqueurs and other good things were produced which Lemaire, his eyes dancing with excitement and happiness, laid out on the table. In a few minutes all was ready.

"*Messieurs, à table,*" cried Antoine gaily. There was a cheerful popping of corks, and in the greatest good humor the four sat down to supper. From a corner the slumberous eyes of Cleopatra, recumbent on her couch of gold, seemed to be watching them with interest.

"Who would not have been Mark Antony, even though he has been dead two thousand years," cried Bourdot. "What a woman! Messieurs, I drink to the success of Lemaire's work of genius."

There came a knock at the door. The four, suddenly grave and quiet, stared at each other with startled faces.

"You open the door, Lemaire," whispered Antoine. "Quick, get that workman's blouse on. If it is anybody dangerous you must swear like a market porter, and say you have got some members of your family with you. We will keep in the shadow here."

"But if it is the police," exclaimed Bourdot.

"We must hope it isn't. If it is, Lemaire must bluff as best he can."

There came another knock. Lemaire opened the door a few inches.

"Who's there?" he asked gruffly.

"A friend of Monsieur Antoine Poiret," came the answer. "I desire to come in and have supper here."

"Good Heavens, that is the Baron's voice," cried Antoine and ran to the door.

VII

To his amazement he found that the Baron was not alone. Far from it. A group or some six or more people stood behind him and it included three ladies.

"You here!" exclaimed the Baron. "That is good fortune indeed. I have a little party of friends here, and we all desire to have supper in the famous studio of the Rue Tartarin. May we come in?"

"*Mais certainement.*" Antoine held open the door. He felt quite bewildered. The Baron entered followed by a most distinguished company.

"Let me present M. Poiret, the author of this delightful conspiracy," said the Baron. Antoine bowed again and again as he heard a string of names famous in Parisian society. The three ladies were all remarkably pretty he noticed. The face of one elegant and slim young man, who was presented as the Duke of Santander, seemed vaguely familiar.

The thought running uppermost in Antoine's mind was as to how he was to supply food for all this assembly.

"How did you know I was having supper here?" he asked the Baron.

"Are you having supper—but I did not know it."

"And yet . . ." Antoine spread out his hands with a helpless gesture.

The Baron laughed, but there was a touch of embarrassment in his tone as he bent to speak in a low tone.

"The fact is, mon cher Poiret, I owe you a thousand apologies." The fame of your latest exploit has got abroad. There is great laughter and excitement about it. It occurred to me, then, to bring a little party to sup in the famous atelier of the Rue Tartarin. You

heard the names of my friends. They are not unknown in the world of fashion. And the Duke of Santander—you know who he is, of course."

"The King of Calabria!" exclaimed Antoine, a light breaking on him.

"Precisely. You cannot imagine how he relishes the joke."

"But your supper!"

"That is arranged for. Boulanger is sending it across. It will be here at any moment."

"Boulanger!" Antoine was not yet at the end of his bewilderment. "But if he finds out why this place has been built—that his business has been dislocated for days because . . ."

"On the contrary. We called Boulanger to us and let him into the secret. He laughed until he cried. I have never seen the proprietor of a restaurant so thoroughly happy. It was extraordinary. He thinks you are a genius, and will superintend the laying of the supper in person. And everything will be carried out with the greatest discretion."

"Oh, but I give it up!" exclaimed Antoine, putting his hand to his head.

The door was suddenly pushed open and a waiter entered bearing a small table. Two other waiters appeared behind him, similarly burdened. And then Boulanger himself entered. His face broke into a happy smile as he saw Antoine and bowed to him.

Antoine explained the situation to the Baron.

"Then you four had better join in our feast," said the Baron. "That will be twelve for supper, Boulanger."

Boulanger rushed off to give more orders.

"Excuse me one moment, please. I will go and explain to my friends. They will be delighted." And Antoine went in to the inner room.

"We have heard everything," said Bourdot. "I know them all—that is with the exception of His Majesty," he added importantly.

"The Duke of Santander," Antoine corrected.

"Have no fear. I am at home in these matters." And Bourdot twirled his moustache.

The Baron entered with the Duke, and presentations were made. The Duke immediately noticed the picture and went to examine it. He was loud in his praise and complimented Lemaire gracefully.

All this while the waiters were dashing about, noiseless but amazingly energetic. In ten minutes they had effected a wonderful transformation. A long table surrounded by chairs ran down the center of the studio, almost filling it. The white cloth was decorated with silver and flowers. Plates and cutlery were laid for twelve. Dozens of candles twinkled in candelabra. It was a miracle.

Boulanger gave an approving look round.

"Supper will be ready in two minutes, Monsieur le Baron," he said.

Even as he spoke the tireless waiters appeared with the first course. With some confusion and a good deal of laughing and chatting the company sat down. Antoine found himself by the side of one of the three charming ladies, who paid him the warmest compliments on his ingenuity and sense of humor. And Antoine was more than pleased to hear that other exploits of *La Lumière* had been appreciated warmly.

The supper was a great success. The Duke of Santander was in the liveliest good humor, and showed that he had an excellent wit.

"I have been introduced to one Paris by the President of the Republic," he said. "I have been introduced to quite another Paris by you, Baron. I much prefer

yours. The studio of the Rue Tartarin is far more amusing than the Opera on a gala night."

"And costs the State far less," replied the Baron, at which the Duke laughed immoderately.

Suddenly when the gaiety was at its height Boulanger rushed in. His face was white. "Monsieur le Baron!" he cried, and pointed behind him.

The chatter and laughter ceased and everybody looked towards the door. A small white-bearded figure, in an overcoat and bowler hat, appeared in the doorway.

"*Bon Dieu,* the Prefect of Police!" exclaimed Antoine.

Monsieur Labiche, seeing ladies present, removed his hat. His face was immobile, but his eyes seemed to twinkle as he looked the company slowly up and down. The silence was complete.

"*Mesdames et Messieurs,*" said the Prefect, with an ironical inclination. He had the situation perfectly in hand, and was enjoying it immensely.

Then his glance rested on the Duke of Santander. An expression of amazement came over his face. Even M. Labiche was completely nonplussed.

"Bon soir, Monsieur le Préfet," said the Duke politely.

"Bon soir, Monsieur le Duc," returned the Prefect. "I did not think when I met you this morning that I should have the pleasure of seeing you so soon again."

"Your charming Paris is full of delicious surprises. Will you not join us at supper?"

"*Ma foi,* I should like to very much, but . . ."

The Prefect hesitated, searching for a phrase. He was saved from his predicament by a chorus of voices from outside which made everybody turn and look towards the door. There were the rough tones of men, the shrill speech of women and the querulous voices of crying infants all mixed up. There was a half-silence in which could be heard the sound of shuffling feet, and

then the sound of a man's voice raised to address the others.

The next instant the outer door, which had been left ajar after the entry of the Prefect was pushed open. The eyes of all the company in the brilliantly lighted studio were directed towards the inner door. A stout little man appeared standing by the side of the Prefect. He blinked with wonderment at the scene before him—the lights, the silver, the flowers, the cut glass, the evening dress and the beautiful ladies of the Baron's supper party.

"Ten thousand devils!" exclaimed Antoine to himself in a heat of anger. "It's Grosjean!"

VIII

The eyes of the newcomer seemed to be starting from his head in wonder.

"*Mais bon Dieu*, where am I!" he exclaimed.

His aspect of amazement was irresistibly comic, and the party exploded in a roar of laughter. The Duke was particularly delighted.

Alone the Prefect had preserved his composure.

"Who are you, and what do you want?" he questioned abruptly.

"My name is Grosjean, and I have come here for shelter for some poor devils of workpeople I have got with me. It is cold, and is just beginning to rain and we have nowhere to go. I have been thrown out of three places to-night. I waited until the audience was leaving a *café chantant*, and tried to rush in as the others were coming out. Useless! We were defeated. Then we stormed the Grand Hotel. The same, and some blackguard hit me with a stick. Observe my hat. We had no better luck with a tramway shelter. Passing

down the Rue Royale there I thought of this place. In desperation . . ."

"But how did you know of this place?" inquired the Prefect sharply.

"*Sapristi,* I built it!"

"Built it! For whom?"

"For me—or rather for *La Lumière,*" interposed Antoine.

The Prefect looked at Antoine, and caressed his little beard.

"Ah! I begin to see." The Prefect turned to the newcomer again. "And so you are the famous Grosjean. How many followers have you out there?"

"We are thirty all told, and there are ten young children."

The Prefect shrugged his shoulders a little hopelessly. Here was a devil of a situation. He looked towards the Duke inquiringly.

But the Duke, who had been talking rapidly in an undertone to the Baron, finding out exactly what all this meant, had risen to his feet.

"Monsieur le Prefect—and you, Monsieur," he turned to include Antoine in his request. "We cannot let these poor people and children stand outside in the cold. May I suggest that they are allowed to come in. No doubt they are hungry, and there is plenty here for them to eat." He looked round the well-filled table.

"I know not precisely who is the host of this charming retreat," said the Prefect drily, "but for my part, Monsieur le Duc, I have no objection to make to your generous proposal."

"Nor I," said Antoine.

"Ah, but that is kind of you!" cried Grosjean, his face beaming. He ran immediately to the other door, and opening it wide shouted:

"*Entrez, tout le monde!*"

It was a pathetic procession that came in. White-faced men and women, young children led by the hand, one or two babies carried in their mothers' arms. They crowded in sheepishly, abashed by the company in whose presence they found themselves.

"We shall need milk," exclaimed Boulanger, looking at the babies. "I will go and see if there is any to be found at this hour."

The company had risen from the table, and as the elegant friends of the Baron came out of the studio Grosjean's homeless family pressed in, their eyes shining at the sight of the good things on the table.

Both rooms were now most uncomfortably full. The Duke found himself surrounded by a group of untidy women holding babies. He took it very well, and smiled at the babies. He also lit a cigar.

The Baron found himself by the side of Antoine.

"How does this affect your little scheme, mon ami?"

"Heaven only knows. I am too bewildered to think. What a night!"

"The Prefect must feel as bewildered as you. He discovers the studio, and then finds a King in it—not to mention the good Grosjean and his family. It is a delicate—and delicious—situation. It seems to me the Prefect has got you, and you have got the Prefect. How if I suggested to the Duke that there should be an informal conference where the four of us might talk things over?"

"Perhaps it would be as well. . . . And yet my position is very strong. Think how Paris would laugh to read of to-night's affair in the Rue Tartarin."

The Baron shook his head.

"You would have to leave the King out, mon ami. He is not here officially, but none the less he is the guest

of every good Parisian—and you are an excellent Parisian."

"Merci! Then, Baron, I leave the matter entirely in your hands. *La Lumière* owes much to you. Do as you wish."

"Good. You shall not regret it."

The Baron worked his way through the crowd to the side of the Duke who nodded readily to something the Baron said to him. The Duke make a signal to the Prefect, who had been looking on at Grosjean's arrangements for feeding his hungry flock. M. Labiche hurried to him.

"Monsieur le Préfet," said the Duke, taking out a well-filled pocketbook, "I should like to place ten thousands francs in your hands for the poor of Paris—with the suggestion that half of it should be applied to the immediate wants of those who are here now." He counted out ten notes, which M. Labiche received with an expression of warm thanks. "And will you do me the favor of lunching with me to-morrow. There will be a very small party. The Hotel Bristol at one o'clock."

The Prefect replied that he would be delighted.

"Then good night, and au revoir."

"It is morning, your Majesty," said the Prefect with a laugh. And through the half-open door he pointed to the first pale light of dawn stealing over the tall house-tops of the Rue Tartarin.

IX

THE three Directors of *La Lumière* sat in council again. Antoine had just returned from his lunch with the King. Bourdot and Morissot were burning to know what had happened, and what had been decided.

"It was most interesting," said Antoine. "He is a charming young man, the King. How pleasant to be a king, after all."

"*Oui, mais . . .*" Bourdot interposed impatiently.

"*Bien, bien.* I will get on. We sat in a small private room at a small round table—I facing the King, the Prefect to my left, the Baron to my right. And the luncheon—delicious! There was a *vin de Bourgogne* such as I can never hope to taste of again. Incomparable! It seems there is very little of it in existence, and it is all reserved for the King."

"And the sardines? Of what vintage were they?" asked Morissot drily.

"Nothing, mon cher Morissot, shall hurry me. There were no sardines. Admirable as sardines are in their place they would have been an impertinence on this occasion. But I can see it would not be fair to describe this perfect luncheon in detail. It was so much beyond ordinary luncheons that to tell you of it would be like dangling an excellent meal before a starving man."

"Oh, mais voyons!" and Bourdot banged his fist on the table.

"Then I will be brief. Everybody was in the best of humor, and the King's first question was as to what became of Grosjean and his family last night. He seemed quite concerned about them, and was much relieved when the Prefect assured him that they are to be well cared for during the next few days, until proper living quarters can be found for them. 'That is excellent,' said the King. *Un très gentil garcon, le Roi.*"

"Yes, but *La Lumière.* Where do we come in?"

"Ma foi, it was all settled so quickly that I hardly know how to describe it. The King said very sweetly to the Prefect, 'By the way, will there be any sequel to

the affair of the Rue Tartarin?' The Prefect answered that so far he had taken no steps of any kind, but if a certain newspaper which he would not name made great capital out of the incident, then it might be necessary to invoke the fullest power of the law. Upon which the Baron said, 'I will answer for it that nothing of the sort shall be done.' And at that the Prefect replied that if this were so he was quite willing to forget his visit to the Rue Tartarin of the night before, but trusted that on the other hand his Majesty would cherish the experience as an amusing and unconventional souvenir of Paris."

"And then?"

"Why then," said Antoine with a wave of the hand, "we drank some more of that incomparable Bourgogne and talked of other things. In short, the affair of the Rue Tartarin was over—finished."

"But that is a bit stiff," exclaimed Bourdot heatedly. "This affair from first to last, has cost us twelve thousand francs, and because you have had a well-cooked luncheon and some wine a little better than we can buy at the café round the corner, you consent tamely to be bought off like that! Sapristi! but it is not business! Twelve thousand francs to the bad!"

"Not entirely," said Antoine. He took a little morocco case from his pocket and from it extracted a glittering scarfpin. "You observe—the King's monogram set in brilliants. He presented me with this. It is chic, is it not?"

At the sight of this Bourdot glared and made a noise of disgust and anger. Even Morissot was moved to complain:

"But, mon cher Antoine, though we submit gladly to your leadership you must remember that we also are directors of *La Lumière*."

"So his Majesty most graciously remembered," said Antoine sweetly. "Here you will observe is a delightful gold cigarette case, with the royal monogram in the corner in rubies. Here is another, precisely similar, but with the monogram in emeralds. The King begged me to hand them to you with his compliments."

There was silence for a space.

"I like emeralds," said Morissot at last.

"And I rubies," said Bourdot.

"It is very charming of his Majesty," admitted Morissot. "Yes, Antoine, you were right. No other course was open to you."

"I shall treasure this case," said Bourdot. "As you say, Antoine, his Majesty is a delightful young man. . . . But you must admit, all the same, that the affair of the Rue Tartarin is a failure—our first failure."

"Not at all," replied Antoine with energy. "It has been money well spent. Do not forget, to begin with, that the Baron, one of the most powerful men in Paris, is our firm friend. And do not forget that the affair of the Rue Tartarin has been talked about throughout the very best circles in Paris, and will be talked about still more. The story of the King will be on every lip. *La Lumière* has become the pet of the smartest and best in Society. And all that for twelve thousand francs! There are some papers would gladly pay half a million."

"And the studio?"

"That still belongs to us. We sell the material to Grosjean, and he takes it down and carts it away as soon as possible. And, I forgot to tell you, the King has taken a great fancy to Lemaire's Cleopatra, and intends to buy the picture. That will make all the greater sensation when it is hung in the Salon. A failure! *Au contraire!* And though we are three

staunch Republicans, I propose that we go round to the humble *Café de la Bonne Bière* and crack a bottle of the best that the Père Duval can give us in a toast."

"What is the toast?" inquired Bourdot.

"The King!" said Antoine. "His Majesty of Calabria, henceforth a regular subscriber to that famous and excellent newspaper, *La Lumière* of Paris."

CHAPTER VI

THE VILLA AT NEUILLY

I

It was inevitable that at some time or other the trenchant style of the political articles written by M. Auguste Morissot in *La Lumière* should lead their author into grave trouble.

Morissot in the happiest frame of mind, was composing one evening a fulmination against his arch and eternal enemy, the Government, when Jean, the doorkeeper, entered with a card.

"For you, Monsieur," said Jean, proffering the card. "The gentleman says he insists on seeing you at once."

"Theodore Hippolyte Dupuy," Morissot read on the piece of pasteboard. It was the name of a Deputy to whom he had slightingly referred in that morning's paper, in writing about a debate in the Chamber.

"Does he seem angry?" asked Morissot.

"Remarkably so, Monsieur."

"*Bien*—you had better show him in at once."

A few seconds later the visitor entered the room. He was short and plump, with the dark skin and luxuriant black beard of a native of the south.

"Have I the honor to speak to Monsieur Morissot?" demanded M. Dupuy, with a flash of his dark eyes.

Morissot inclined his head, and asked what he could have the pleasure of doing for his visitor.

"You referred to me in ungracious terms in your journal this morning." M. Dupuy spoke loudly and angrily. "You said that I might make an excellent comedian, but that I am a very bad Deputy. Monsieur, I demand that you retract those words immediately, and write a full and handsome apology for having published them."

"I regret, Monsieur, but *La Lumière* does not hold its political opinions lightly. It is not in the habit of retracting its considered judgment." Morissot spoke politely but decisively.

"Then am I to understand that you refuse to do as I wish?" The dark eyes of M. Dupuy were dancing with rage.

"Alas, I am afraid it is impossible."

"Then you shall give me satisfaction in another and more drastic fashion. My seconds shall wait upon you and at once. I wish you good evening, Monsieur." And the irate Deputy bounced out of the room.

Morissot carefully placed his monocle in his eye and stared out of the window. He had never fought a duel. But now evidently his turn had come. Well, there was nothing surprising in that. The amazing thing was that it had not happened to him long before. The boulevard journalist, and especially if he fishes in the troubled waters of politics, must always be prepared for such an adventure.

There was the question of seconds. Obviously he must have Antoine and Bourdot. Himself as principal, his co-directors as seconds, *La Lumière* would make its stand on the field of honor in the name of truth and justice. For Morissot had the supreme advantage as a journalist that he was sincere, and believed in what he wrote. He had suggested that M. Dupuy would make a better comedian than he was a member of Parliament

because that was his honest opinion after listening to a debate in the Chamber of Deputies in which M. Dupuy had taken part.

Morissot walked down the corridor to Antoine's room, and found him there talking to Bourdot.

"I have something to announce to you, *mes amis*," said Morissot, with a touch of gravity in his tones. And he told them what had just passed.

"The Devil!" said Antoine.

"*Mon cher ami!*" exclaimed Bourdot.

"But you seem surprised, both of you! Everybody must fight a duel at some time or other," Morissot laughed lightly.

"Your calm is admirable," said Antoine. "But you know, doubtless, something of the reputation of this Dupuy?"

"As a politician you mean? He is of no account whatever."

"As a politician! Sapristi, no! As a duellist," cried Antoine.

The slightest change came over Morissot's face.

"He is is known, then, as a duellist?"

"*Ma foi*, is he known! He has had at least half a dozen affairs, and he has pinked him man every time. *Vraiment*—you did not know?"

"It is the first I have heard of it. Diable! That is interesting." And Morissot smiled grimly. "Do you know any details concerning this fire eater?"

"Nothing more than that."

"Well, no matter how terrible he may be, I've got to fight him. You two will be my seconds, of course." They assented readily. "Then I will leave everything in your hands."

"I know you do not fence, *mon ami*," said Antoine. "How are you with the pistol?"

"Perhaps I'm a dead shot," laughed Morissot. "But since I've never fired one I don't exactly know. Sword or pistol, it is all the same to me. And now I must be off and finish my article."

Antoine gripped one hand, Bourdot the other.

"Leave it to us, and have no fear, *mon vieux*. In two days from now you will be the hero of a sensational encounter. This Dupuy shall not have it all his own way. One man cannot have all the luck."

When Morissot had gone the other two looked at each other gravely.

"I don't like the look of this, *mon vieux* Bourdot."

"Nor I."

"Time is short. If I know anything about this ferocious Dupuy his seconds will be here at any moment. He has probably got them waiting somewhere near. Fancy Morissot provoking such a fellow, and knowing nothing of his reputation."

"If Morissot did not like his politics he would attack the Evil One himself," said Bourdot warmly.

"It is true. In politics he fears nobody."

Morissot entered again.

"Our friend has not wasted much time," he said. "I think he must have had his seconds waiting outside in a cab. I will bring them in and leave them to you."

He returned in a moment with two correctly attired gentlemen who were ceremoniously introduced. Morissot, with a bow to the visitors, withdrew once more, leaving his own and his opponent's seconds in conference.

The meeting only lasted a few moments. Antoine was anxious to make a few inquiries as to the prowess of M. Dupuy before he committed his friend to any conditions. It was arranged that there should be a meeting at lunch on the following day at which the *procès verbal* of the combat should be drawn up. And

with cordial handshakes the representatives of the fiery Dupuy took their leave.

"Do you know anything about drawing up the conditions of an encounter on the field of honor?" asked Antoine of Bourdot.

"Very little. I have seen such a document, but, *ma foi*, that is all."

"I have never even seen one. And these things have to be done most carefully—grandly and with an air. Why is one not taught at school how to draw up a *procès verbal* for a duel? We must not look insignificant before the seconds of Morissot's adversary. Then Morissot will need a surgeon to accompany him to the field of honor. Where the devil does one find at short notice a surgeon who will mix himself up in a duel? And we must find out all we can about Dupuy. Perhaps it will be better for Morissot to meet him with pistols. What a situation! It is not so amusing as I thought to be a second."

"On the contrary, it is a position of great responsibility," said Bourdot.

Antoine sat in thought for a few moments. Then his eye lit up with relief.

"It is a case for Severin-Blanchard. Why did not we think of him at once? He will get us out of all these difficulties." And Antoine reached for the telephone.

II

Monsieur Severin-Blanchard was a well-known figure in Paris. He had a considerable reputation as an author and dramatist, and in addition had fought in more than a score of duels. But more than this he was recognized as the supreme authority on duelling. Time after time people of his acquaintance who were in dif-

ficulties such as now beset Antoine and Bourdot, came to consult him on the etiquette and procedure of affairs of honor.

He had studied the duel as it had been practiced in all climes and all ages. His flat in the Rue Vaugirard was a museum of weapons, ancient and modern. His services were so often in demand that gradually he had become a sort of unofficial *arbitre* or referee of nearly every duel that took place in Paris and the neighborhood. He knew the intimate details of many stormy love affairs, the frequent cause of his being called out of bed at all sorts of awkward hours. He had been the director of combat in hundreds of *affaires*. In times of high political tension, when hot words and *cartes de visite* flew about like autumn leaves, he was one of the busiest men in Paris.

He had indeed been known to complain that he was so much occupied in arranging and conducting other people's affairs of honor that he had little or no time to indulge in any duels of his own. Not that he was in any way bellicose or truculent. In spite of his upturned moustaches, the little imperial that curled on his chin and his general air of a Mousquetaire who has strayed into the twentieth century, he was one of the kindest of men. But duelling was his hobby, and he tumbled into a *rencontre* joyously, as a bookworm picks up with delight an interesting volume at a bookseller's stall. He had no positive objection to pistols, but the ring of flashing steel blades in a quiet sylvan spot on a fine spring morning was to him the highest pinnacle of enjoyment in life.

M. Severin-Blanchard was sitting at his desk working on the third act of a new farce, whose delivery was much overdue, when the telephone tinkled. He made an exclamation of impatience as he picked up the receiver.

"Allo!" he cried in his rich baritone voice.

"Is that Monsieur Severin-Blanchard? This is Poiret, Antoine Poiret of *Lu Lumière*, speaking. I wish to see you at once on an important matter. It is most urgent."

"*Mon cher ami*, I am very, very occupied," replied Severin-Blanchard, in a tone of the deepest sorrow. "But what is it? Is it a question of an encounter?"

As briefly as possible Antoine explained the matter and its various difficulties.

"Only you can help us," he concluded, pleadingly. "There is no other in Paris to whom we can turn."

"So be it," said Severin-Blanchard, touched in his tenderest spot. "I am at your service from this moment onwards."

"A thousand thanks. We are coming along at once."

A quarter of an hour later the two seconds entered the *cabinet de travail* of the great man. Severin-Blanchard put cigars and wine before them, and they plunged into the question at once. He listened carefully to all that was said.

"Then I am to understand that your client is quite unskilled with either sword or pistol. It is not the best of preparations for a meeting on the field. And yet I have known many others just as ill equipped who have come off victorious. There is a certain chance in these matters. And courage and audacity count."

"That is good news," said Antoine. "You will pardon, I hope, my great ignorance in such matters, but there is one rather delicate question which I wish to put to you. . . . Are the duels of to-day often—dangerous?"

The eyebrows of Severin-Blanchard went up in surprise.

"*Ma foi*, every duel is dangerous. The swords are

sharp, and every pistol—I have loaded hundreds of them—is ready and willing to kill its man. It is the duellists who are at fault. They pierce an arm instead of a body, or are nervous at the moment of firing. Make no mistake, Monsieur. Every duel is a serious affair." And Severin-Blanchard brought his hand down with a loud bang on his desk.

"That is exactly what I wanted to know," said Antoine. "Then as Dupuy is a deadly fencer, perhaps it will be better for our friend to fight him with pistols."

"But on the contrary, Dupuy is a dead shot and cannot fence at all."

"Cannot fence at all!" cried Antoine. "But he has pinked his man severely on every occasion he has gone out."

M. Severin-Blanchard laughed his rich laugh.

"That is true, but all the same he knows no more about the sword than does your friend. He has a little secret. *Tenez!* I will show you." He rose and detached from the wall a pair of foils. "Take this—have no fear, there is a button on the end. Put yourself in position. On guard! The duel is about to commence. We are standing so—is it not—ready for the combat. To start the combat the *arbitre* calls out the famous words—I have called them, ah! how many hundreds of times—'Allez, Messieurs!'"

"It is the almost invariable custom for the adversaries not to cross swords until the two words 'Allez, Messieurs!' have been cried. But it is quite within his right for a duellist to attack the moment the *arbitre* has said 'Allez.' The 'Allez!' is the command. The 'Messieurs' is merely a polite addition to the word of command. You follow me?"

"*Parfaitement.*"

"Then I will show you. You, Monsieur," he turned

to Bourdot, "will start the combat by shouting 'Allez, Messieurs!' And you will see how Dupuy always wins, and why his combats only last one second—just one short second. Ready!"

"*Allez,* . . ." cried Bourdot—but had not time to say more.

Like a flash Severin-Blanchard lunged forward, his foil striking Antoine in the shoulder and bending under the shock.

The director of duels recovered himself.

"The duel is over. You would now be lying on the grass with the doctors busily cutting the shirt away from your shoulder. I should be lighting a cigarette and receiving the congratulations of my friends. Is it not clear?"

"As daylight," said Antoine. "I thank you for your brilliant exposition. I had no idea that a duel might be won so easily. Dupuy's secret is worth knowing."

"Do not forget that he allies with it marvelous quickness and energy, and a perfect *sang-froid.* He is afraid of nothing. And now in what further way can I serve you gentlemen?"

"We wish, if you could so honor us, that you should be the *arbitre* of this duel. And there are a number of details in which, with the time at our disposal, we find a certain difficulty—the choice of a doctor, the drawing up of the *procès-verbal,* a delicate task for which none is so well fitted as yourself—and others. . . ."

"Say no more. If the seconds of M. Dupuy have no objection—and I do not anticipate any—I shall be glad to preside at this duel. And as to the *procès-verbal* that is a simple matter. We will draw it up now. You suggest then that M. Morissot meets his adversary sword in hand."

"Yes, the sword."

"But if Dupuy is so terrible with this weapon!" interjected Bourdot.

"But thanks to M. Severin-Blanchard we know his method, do we not?" said Antoine looking hard at his friend.

"Ah, precisely." A look of understanding came into Bourdot's eyes.

"With swords then." Severin-Blanchard began to write. For ten minutes his pen scratched away busily on a task of which he never tired. At the end of his writing he read out the proposed conditions of the duel. The document was a model of its kind, rich in fine and sonorous phrases.

"Admirable," said Antoine enthusiastically. "With that in hand we can meet the seconds of our adversary with every confidence to-morrow."

They took their leave a few minutes later with many expressions of warm thanks for the help and courtesy extended to them.

"*Vraiment*, he is a splendid fellow, this Severin-Blanchard," said Antoine when they were out in the street again. "Who would think that he is the hero of a score and more of duels? And thanks to him I see daylight for friend Morissot. It will be excellent if he skewers the redoubtable Dupuy."

"If. But do you think he has any real chance?"

"Every chance. Do you not see? Severin-Blanchard not only showed us how Dupuy fights. He also showed us—without intending it—how Morissot may counter him. At the word '*Allez!*' Morissot instantly steps backwards. Dupuy by this time has lunged forward, his blow is spent and Morissot has him at his mercy, to pink him where he pleases. One thrust and the duel is over. To-morrow early we must find a *salle d'armes*, and there we will practice this stroke with him. Morissot

can be as cool as a fish. With a little tuition from us he will acquit himself splendidly on the field of honor.

III

Two days later at nine o'clock in the morning Antoine and Bourdot drove to Morissot's apartment in the Rue de Faubourg St. Honoré. They had acquired a sumptuous automobile for the occasion, and Antoine nursed a bright new pair of duelling swords.

They found Morissot just finishing a very light breakfast. He was dressed ready to go out, and appeared quite calm, if a trifle pale. He greeted his friends with a smile.

"You have slept well?" asked Antoine anxiously.

"Not at all badly. I had a little writing to do." He handed a sealed packet to Antoine. "You understand—if by any chance anything should happen."

"Ah, bah, but nonsense, my dear friend," cried Antoine boisterously to hide the emotion that overcame him at this incident. "Your fiery Dupuy's as good as vanquished already. You behaved splendidly at the *salle d'armes* yesterday." Antoine put himself into the attitude of a fencer. "Your action was perfect."

"*Allez:* back, p-s-s-t, got him! *Ca y est!* Two seconds and the duel is over. He will be the most surprised man in Paris."

"It will not be my fault if he isn't," said Morissot. "That I promise you. But before we go—a handshake, dear friends. Thanks for all you have done for me."

At this Antoine kissed his friend warmly on both cheeks, and Bourdot did the same. They shook hands silently.

"And now, come along," said Antoine briskly. "The

meeting is for ten-thirty, and we have the doctor to pick up on the way. You can thank our friend Severin-Blanchard that it is not five o'clock in the morning. He has had a great deal to do with abolishing those absurdly early duels. 'Why not let a man sleep and breakfast in comfort, and go to the field with a light heart,' he said. Fancy getting up at five o'clock to fight a duel. Brrrh! But at ten-thirty one has slept and had breakfast—it is little worse than going to the barber's."

And he rattled on in apparent high spirits, trying to give the illusion that going out to fight a duel was a most amiable and amusing way of passing the morning.

They picked up the doctor in the Avenue de la Grande Armée, where he was standing at a corner waiting, a case of instruments under his arm. Antoine and Bourdot had had a short interview with him on the previous day. He was now presented to Morissot, and the two cordially shook hands.

"It is a beautiful morning," said the doctor.

"Glorious," returned Morissot.

Nobody looked at the case which the doctor was now carefully depositing under the seat.

The automobile sped smoothly down the broad Avenue de la Grande Armée out through the Porte Maillot, and along the Avenue de Neuilly. The place for the encounter had been selected by Severin-Blanchard. He possessed a small intelligence service peculiarly his own, by which he heard of all sorts of suitable spots in which a duel could take place without fear of interruption. For the present occasion he had chosen the grounds of a villa at Neuilly which belonged to an acquaintance of his and had been empty for some time.

The car turned down a broad and quiet avenue lined with large houses, each one standing in its own grounds.

It stopped outside a handsome villa, with white walls and dark green latticed shutters, where another motor car was already stationed. The party got out, unlatched a big wooden gate, followed a graveled path that led to the back of the villa and found themselves on a large and secluded lawn.

Severin-Blanchard was already there, examining the ground, and came forward to meet them.

"You are early, Messieurs," he said, with a sweep of his hat, "but I expect the others here at any moment now. M. Dupuy is always well in time."

As they spoke there was a click at the gate, and in a moment Dupuy appeared with his two seconds and his surgeon. The Deputy walked with a confident and even nonchalant air. He had the easy look of a man who regarded a duel as a mere bagatelle. At the first sight of him Antoine felt that Morissot had indeed a redoubtable adversary.

"How do you feel, *mon vieux*," he asked.

"Quite as well as can be expected," replied Morissot. He was wearing his monocle, and appeared to be as calm as anybody present. Only a touch of pallor in his cheeks showed that he was fully alive to the situation.

"And the lessons we had yesterday—it all comes back to you?"

"Perfectly. I shall not forget what it is necessary to do."

Severin-Blanchard was now exchanging a few words with Dupuy, and the two doctors were in consultation. Antoine and Bourdot greeted the two seconds of *la partie adverse*, and exchanged a few polite phrases. From the corner of his eye Antoine noticed that Severin-Blanchard, a look of supreme content on his handsome picturesque face, was sterilizing a pair of foils in burning alcohol. All was ready.

The two friends went back to Morissot and assisted him to take off his jacket and waistcoat. Everything was very quiet and still and Antoine felt a slight sinking beneath his waistcoat, as if he himself were about to fight. It seemed a very cold-blooded business. Nobody showed a trace of anger or excitement. Why should two men be preparing to skewer each other?

The two adversaries were now in line, facing each other; Dupuy, small, round, compact and heavily bearded, with resolution gleaming in his dark eyes; Morissot tall and spare and with a look Antoine had never seen before on his usually languid face.

Severin-Blanchard approached the two men, holding a light cane with which he was ready at any moment to intervene in the combat and strike up the swords of the duellists. He addressed a few words to the combatants, relative to the conditions of the encounter, and then took up a position a few paces away, the cane lightly poised in his hand.

The moment had come. Antoine gripped Bourdot's arm. Would Morissot remember his lesson?

Severin-Blanchard took a breath.

"*Allez*, . . . !"

Like a flash at the first syllable the little Deputy rushed forward, his blade aimed straight at Morissot's chest. But in the same moment Morissot leaped nimbly back, and the point of his adversary's sword stopped an inch from his shirt. The Deputy was now fully extended, his legs wide apart and body thrown far forward. And even as the word "Messieurs" came from the referee of the duel, Morissot made a step to the left and calmly and resolutely thrust his blade well into the upper arm of the Deputy.

There came a cry from M. Dupuy, not so much because of the pain of the wound as of surprise and anger

at the unexpected way in which affairs had turned. He dropped his sword and rapped out an oath rich with the rolling r's of the South:

"*Tonnerre de Dieu!*"

His doctor rushed up at once. M. Dupuy had turned very white, and was tottering a little. He was helped gently to a sitting posture, and the doctor, cuting away the shirt, made a rapid examination of the wound, the seconds of M. Dupuy and Morissot's doctor standing by.

Antoine and Bourdot wrung their comrade's hand and heaped congratulations on him. The voice of Dupuy could be heard faintly protesting that he wished to go on with the fight, to which his doctor was replying soothingly as he dressed the wound.

"I hope he is not too badly hurt," said Morissot.

"Nothing like so badly as you would have been had anything gone wrong," said Antoine. "Dupuy aimed straight for your ribs."

For the first time Antoine had an opportunity to look round him, and was surprised to find how extensive were the grounds in which they stood. From the lawn no other house was visible. Lighting a cigarette he went on a little voyage of exploration. The lawn gave place to a well-kept shrubbery, and pushing on through this Antoine found to his surprise that the grounds sloped down sharply to the Seine. At the edge of the water a skiff was tied up near a little boathouse. The wooded edge of an island faced the garden about thirty yards across the river. On both its main sides the property was bounded by high walls. It was a surprisingly secluded spot, and Antoine decided that it would be a charming place to live in.

But it was time to be going, and he turned back towards the lawn. With the exception of Bourdot and

Morissot, who were standing apart talking, everybody was still gathered round the wounded man. And then, looking beyond towards the villa Antoine saw something that made him halt abruptly.

At one of the upper windows was the face of a man looking down intently on the scene passing on the lawn. It was a strong, clean shaven face, pale and surmounted by a shock of dark hair. Antoine felt for the moment that he must be dreaming. But there was no possible doubt. It was the face of Bertoli, the world-famous Italian tenor, the idol of fashionable Europe and America!

Well-screened himself from observation Antoine stood and watched. Bertoli half turned round as if to speak to someone in the room, and a moment later Antoine could just make out the faint outline of a woman standing behind him. Except that she had fair hair and was evidently young, Antoine could see nothing more.

There was a movement in the group on the lawn, and the two faces abruptly disappeared. Dupuy was now on his feet again, and Antoine rejoined his friends who were now talking to Severin-Blanchard.

"Did you say this villa was empty?" Antoine asked the director of the combat.

"But of course, or we should not be here. It has been empty for six months or more. It belongs to my friend the Comte de Peyrac, who is now traveling in the East. Why do you ask?"

"Nothing, but it occurred to me that for an empty villa the grounds and everything about it are kept in excellent order. . . . It is a charming place."

Ten minutes later they were rolling back swiftly towards Paris and on the same road, but proceeding very slowly to avoid jolting, came Dupuy and his friends. Through the ministrations of Severin-

Blanchard a reconciliation had been effected and Morissot had shaken the uninjured arm of his opponent.

Bourdot was humming a gay song as they sped back towards the city. The Arc de Triomphe loomed up again, at the end of the leafy vista of the Avenue de la Grande Armée.

"That is a splendid sight after an anxious morning," Bourdot cried. "We will have the best luncheon Paris can give us." He clacked his tongue.

"What say you, Antoine? Where shall we go? The Café de Paris—the Café Anglais—where? Morissot has no say in this matter."

"Where?" said Antoine absently. "Anywhere you please. . . . But no. I have a fancy, if it is agreeable to you both, to go to the Café de la Paix."

It had suddenly occurred to him that on his rare professional visits to Paris this was the restaurant most favored by Bertoli.

IV

As has been said more than once, if you are in search of any particular person you have only to sit long enough on the terrace outside the Café de la Paix, and sooner or later the object of your search is bound to pass. This rule does not apply to the restaurant inside, but Antoine and his two friends had been sitting there at luncheon for only half an hour or more when there was a sudden show of interest and turning of heads, and Bertoli entered. What interested Antoine even more was that the famous tenor was accompanied by a young woman with a head of glorious fair hair.

They sat down at a table not far away and Antoine could now see that Bertoli's companion was decidedly

beautiful. The two attracted a great deal of attention, but they seemed not to notice it, so much were they interested in each other.

Bourdot, scenting copy, was awake on the instant.

"I wonder who she is? What a complexion. She is a beauty. English or American? There is no doubt about it, there are beautiful women even outside France."

"Do not look so closely at them," said Antoine. "I have something to tell you." And he recounted what he had seen after the duel.

Bourdot and Morissot were amazed.

"Then this empty villa is not empty," exclaimed the hero of the morning.

"That is the conclusion I came to instantly," replied Antoine drily. "The point is why is Bertoli hiding himself in this secluded villa with the charming creature we now see sitting beside him? No doubt it is simply a little love affair, in which case we may let our interest in it end here. Who are we to sit as judges on the intimate affairs of the most noted singer in the universe? But I cannot help feeling that there may be something more behind it. That villa is certainly supposed to be empty. If not the present occupants would have revealed themselves this morning and prayed us to go and fight our duels elsewhere. But instead, they peeped guiltily from a window and disappeared the moment they were in danger of being observed. I think there may be something in this for *La Lumière*."

"They have just looked this way," said Bourdot.

"Yes, but they don't know that they were observed this morning. They are merely interested at the coincidence of finding us here. And by the way, who is this Comte de Peyrac to whom we are told the villa belongs?"

Bourdot obliged with alacrity.

"Sportsman and man about town. Young, fairly wealthy, takes a keen interest in aviation. Has had many love affairs. I have not heard anything of him for some time past. I suppose that, as Severin-Blanchard said, he must be abroad. Where does he come in?"

"Well, either he is a friend of Bertoli's or Bertoli has entered the villa burglariously, which is not likely. By the way, when does Bertoli appear next at the Opera?"

"To-night in Manon."

"I have never heard him. If it is possible to get a ticket at such a late hour I will give myself that pleasure this evening."

"Leave it to me, and you shall have the ticket if it is humanly possible. The place is packed every night he sings and there is always a crowd clamoring for admittance. It will not be easy, but I think I shall be able to manage it."

"*Bon Dieu*, but what a position," sighed Antoine. "The world hanging on every note you sing, gold rolling in by the barrel, ladies sighing for your smile. It is better than being an Emperor."

They rose from their table a few moments later and went out leaving Bertoli and his fair companion still in the restaurant. Antoine was sorry to lose sight of the tenor, but it was obvious that even if there were anything more than usually interesting in the affair of the villa at Neuilly, there was no possibility of following it up immediately.

The three directors separated outside, hurrying off to pressing affairs that had been neglected in the excitement of preparing for the duel. Arrived at the office, Antoine first of all gave a few particulars to Durand and sent him out on a tour of investigation.

It was towards six in the evening, and Antoine, busy

at work, had forgotten for the moment the events of the morning, when Bourdot entered his room waving a flimsy piece of paper.

"It would sound like a romantic novel if I described to you the shifts to which I have been put to get this ticket," he announced. "My quest ended at the Ministry of the Interior. But there you are. The President himself could not have performed a greater miracle."

"A thousand thanks, mon cher Bourdot. You will be there yourself, of course."

"Box twelve on the second tier will find me. We will meet during the *entr' acte*."

Some two and a half hours later Antoine ascended the splendid staircase of the Opera House. He was but one of hundreds who had entered the doors of the great building at the same moment. It hurt the pride of Parisians a little that Bertoli, who was not one of them, should pack the national temple of music as no one else could, but this did not prevent Paris from flocking to hear him on the very few occasions when his fabulous engagements in New York, London and elsewhere, permitted him to pay a rare visit.

Antoine felt a thrill of pleasure and excitement as he settled down in his stall and looked round the huge auditorium with its tiers of boxes and far-away galleries. The air was vibrant with the hum of conversation from thousands of people. The name of Bertoli was spoken on every hand, and those who had heard him before were importantly assuring those who had not what a wonder and delight lay in store for them.

After a quarter of an hour's delay, which was received with calm, as being the way of the Opera, the splendid orchestra played the overture to "Manon." There was another pause after this, and the audience sat in mo-

mentary expectation of seeing the curtain rise. But the minutes ran on, and signs of impatience began to show themselves. Half an hour late! This was too much. Again the orchestra attacked the overture, and at this people said sagely that evidently there had been a little delay of some kind, and the curtain would now rise the moment the orchestra had finished. But again there was a pause, and the great multitude fidgeted. There came a few whistles and shouts from the gallery and gradually the shouting gathered in volume until thousands of people were shouting "Curtain, curtain!" in chorus. This orderly demand soon gave way to a confused uproar in which impatient and angry people gave vent to their feelings in all sorts of ways. Presently with the tumult at its height there was a movement in the center of the vast curtain, and a small figure in evening dress stood facing the great audience.

Quiet was obtained with difficulty. The personage in evening dress, obviously disliking his task, then announced that owing to an unforeseen circumstance Bertoli was unable to appear that evening. This was deeply to be regretted, but he had pleasure in saying that an excellent *remplaçant* in the person of Monsieur Jules Dubosq would sing the part of des Grieux.

M. Dubosq must have been excessively annoyed at the demonstration that followed. The great house burst into a tornado of rage and disappointment. To be told this after waiting impatiently for nearly an hour! Antoine turned round in his seat and looked on what seemed to be an angry sea. Thousands of people below and aloft who had paid high prices to see Bertoli were shouting and waving their arms. It was an impressive sight, but Antoine was thinking of something else. What was behind this nonappearance of Bertoli? He left his seat and as quickly as possible made his way

to the box in which Bourdot had said he would be. Opening it without ceremony Antoine saw Bourdot, in the middle of a party of friends, looking down on the extraordinary scene of the most majestic theatre in the world given up to pandemonium. Antoine took his arm and drew him out into the corridor.

"*Eh bien*, what do you think of it?" he demanded sharply.

"It is an amazing sight," said Bourdot fervently, "I have never seen anything like it."

"*Peste*, I am not referring to that absurd exhibition! A lot of foolish people howling because they cannot have their money's worth. Let them howl! But Bertoli and the villa at Neuilly! Now what do you say? Is it merely coincidence, or is there something sinister behind this? Bertoli would not dare to disappoint the public without grave cause. He was in perfect health this morning."

Bourdot opened his eyes wide.

"*Dame*, I had not thought of that! . . . *Bon Dieu*, but perhaps you are right! Wait. I will get my hat and coat." He darted back into the box, and was by Antoine's side again in an instant.

"It would be as well before starting out on this affair to find out what the official version is here of Bertoli's failure to appear. You know this place, is it not?"

"I have the run of it. It is a privilege accorded to few," said Bourdot proudly. "Come with me."

He started off at a run along the corridor, descended an unexpected staircase and stopped before a small door at which an imposing individual wearing a large silver chain round his neck was stationed. Bourdot said something, slipped a five-franc piece into the man's hand and the magic door opened to them.

A few steps forward and they found themselves in a

vast and lofty region of canvas and cordage. Groups of people, some of them rouged and in the costume of the eighteenth century, were standing here and there, their faces drawn and serious. An overwhelming uproar still came from the audience, and here, behind the scenes, it seemed in no wise ridiculous, but wholly alarming. Antoine had a sudden rush of sympathy for those who had to face such unpleasant music.

The stage was set for the first scene of *Manon*—the inn at Amiens, where des Grieux first meets his charmer. Here were assembled a number of important-looking people belonging to the Opera House and one of them stood a little apart, his face contorted as if with the effort to shut out the noise that came from beyond the lowered curtain. Here Bourdot approached, and spoke loudly in his ear.

"Why has Bertoli not appeared?" he cried.

"He is indisposed," came the answer faintly.

"*Non, mais voyons!*" cried Bourdot. "What is the real reason?"

The official shrugged his shoulders and threw his hands up with a gesture of despair.

"We know as much as you. He is not at his hotel. We have scoured Paris for him. He is not to be found anywhere. We are desperate. That is all." And the distracted man turned away.

Bourdot gave Antoine the news.

"That is enough. Come, to the office first. Durand may have found out something that will help us."

Bourdot led him swiftly along a maze of corridors where at last the noise of the audience grew faint, and so out of the rear of the building by a door unknown to the public. They ran towards the boulevard, picked up a taxi at the corner and a few minutes later were bounding up the office steps.

They found Durand engaged with the head printer in the exciting sport of throwing darts at a board. Durand followed them at once into Antoine's room.

"What do you know?" said Antoine.

"Not much," replied the office investigator. "Bertoli has been staying at the Majestic, as he usually does. But as far as I can make out he is seen there very little. He seems to pass his nights outside. I got this from a clerk in the reception office. But where he goes to I've no idea, and I don't think anybody at the hotel knew either."

"And the Comte de Peyrac?"

"I have searched for him everywhere but I am sure he is not in Paris. There seems no doubt of his being abroad, but where I can't find out."

"Hm! There is not much in all that, is there? There is only one thing to do. We must go to Neuilly and see what that brings forth . . . It will be very dark round that villa. Can you put your hand on such a thing as an electric torch, Durand?"

"I have one in my desk. I will get it."

He returned in a moment with the torch and something else that shone brightly.

"I don't know what the affair is, but is this likely to be useful?" He handed over a handy-looking revolver. "Careful. It is loaded."

"Excellent" said Antoine pocketing both. "I have neved used one, but it gives a feeling of security to have it there. Bourdot *mon cher*, you had better return to the Opera and watch developments there. Durand, you come along with me to Neuilly. I will tell you all about it on the way out."

V

Half an hour later they stopped their taxi a short distance from the villa. Antoine bestowed a substantial tip on the driver, and told him to wait patiently, no matter for how long.

"I have an idea," he said as they walked along. "It is possible there is nothing in all this, and we might look foolish if caught prowling about the grounds of a villa at night. We will say, in that case, that a valuable diamond ring was lost during the duel this morning, and that we have come to look for it. And mind, we understand always that the place is empty."

They came to the gate. The front of the villa facing the avenue was dark, giving no sign of life. Antoine gently tried the gate. It opened and they passed cautiously along the path to the back of the villa.

Gradually they gained the lawn. It was an eerie adventure and Antoine felt anything but cheerful as they stood there in the black darkness. There was no sound but the mournful rustling of the wind in the trees. Then from somewhere on the river came the melancholy hoot of a tug. It died away in a wail, leaving the silence more depressing than before.

In an upstairs room a light was burning. It was the room in which Antoine had seen Bertoli that morning. He whispered this information to his companion.

"What are we to do next?" whispered Durand in reply.

"*Ma foi,* I don't quite know," returned Antoine. He felt convinced now that Bertoli was in the villa, and that some unusual cause was keeping him there. But how to solve the mystery?

"Does the river flow past the bottom of the garden?" Antoine explained the lie of the grounds.

"Listen, then. Is not that the sound of a motor boat approaching?"

"You're right. . . . Teuf! teuf! . . . there it goes again."

The sounds came nearer and then at the bottom of the garden there was a sudden flurry of sound from a fussy little engine, and all was quiet again.

"Somebody landing here. We will stay where we are, and take our chance," said Antoine.

The two waited, strung up to a high pitch of nervous tension. It seemed ages before they heard anything more. Then there was the sound of somebody advancing through the shrubbery.

These sounds ceased and Antoine thought he heard the faint hiss of whispering. Then another rustling of bushes, coming nearer. Presently Antoine felt that somebody was standing on the lawn near to them. He could stand the suspense no longer. In any case some step forward had to be made. Almost involuntarily he pulled the electric torch from his pocket and pressed the button.

Antoine nearly fell over with astonishment at what he saw. Standing bathed in a flood of intense white light was Inspector Sauvage, and with him his faithful subordinate Pince.

Inspector Sauvage was even more astonished. His eyes started from his head with the shock of this unexpected encounter. His aspect of surprise and consternation was almost comic. But he soon recovered his composure and slipped a hand quickly into a side pocket.

"Who is it?" he demanded hoarsely, raising his voice as little as possible.

"Have no fear," said Antoine. "It is I, Antoine Poiret, with a friend."

In his turn Sauvage produced a pocket lamp and flashed it over the two. He took a quick step towards them, and there was another expression on his face now.

"*Nom de D . . .!*" he growled savagely. "Can one never get rid of you and *La Lumière* then? Must one find you everywhere? How much do you know of this affair?"

"Quite a lot," said Antoine confidently. "But, *voyez-vous,* Inspector, there is no need to get angry with us. This matter has developed very quickly as far as I am concerned. That villa conceals something I am very anxious to know. But the affair has arrived at a point where extreme delicacy is necessary, and I was just wondering in what way I could soonest get into touch with you."

"*C'est très gentil de votre part,*" replied the Inspector most sarcastically. "But I have had this villa under observation for the past three weeks."

"And as Bertoli failed to appear at the Opéra to-night you have come to find out the reason why."

"What! Bertoli did not appear to-night at the Opéra! How do you know that?" The detective's voice showed that the news was a disagreeable shock to him.

"*Parbleu,* I was there! After nearly an hour of waiting the audience shouted for him. There was a scene I can tell you when it was announced that he could not appear."

"*Nom d'un nom!* And the reason?"

"Officially that he was indisposed. But in truth the Opéra officials had scoured Paris for him and could not find him. They had no idea where he was."

Sauvage uttered something like a groan. The con-

versation had taken place in the dark but Antoine could feel the agitation of the Inspector.

"It is that sacré breakdown," the voice of Pince broke in.

Sauvage cursed through set teeth.

"*Sacrebleu!* Every night for three weeks we have been watching and nothing has happened. To-night that miserable boat broke down and when we had patched it up we decided to come on here before going to the telephone. Ah, but what vile luck. *Ah mais . . .!*"

Sauvage stopped suddenly. An automobile was heard in the avenue. It stopped outside the gate. Voices were heard, and the click of the gate. Presently a lantern appeared swinging in somebody's hand and casting a waving patch of light on the ground.

Who was it?

Two electric torches flashed out. They showed the picturesque figure of Severin-Blanchard. He was holding the lantern, and behind him stood a chauffeur.

"What the devil is this?" shouted the newcomer angrily as the dazzling light struck in his eyes. "Who are you?"

Antoine stepped forward and shone the light on his own face.

"You!" cried Severin-Blanchard. "*Mais c'est extraordinaire.* I have come on behalf of that poor Dupuy. He is a little feverish to-night and nothing would comfort him unless I came here at once. He says he has lost a valuable diamond ring, and I have come to try and find it."

"*Non, mais nom d'une pipe!*" murmured Antoine.

VI

Explanations were hurried, and left most people concerned in some bewilderment. But it was time for action.

"If anybody is in that villa they must know by now that somebody is here outside it," said Sauvage. "To the front, quick, Pince! I will stay here. Stand by the door and let nobody come out of it."

He flashed his lamp boldly over the house, and the light danced in through the windows. But there was no sign of movement.

Sauvage mounted a small flight of steps leading on to a terrace and knocked loudly at the door. After an interval he knocked again but there was no sign that anybody was inside. Then he tried the handle, the door opened and he stepped inside.

Antoine had followed him closely and was on his heels as the detective entered the villa. The others followed. Sauvage turned round as if to protest but seemed to realize that circumstances were against any autocratic display of authority.

Antoine was aflame with curiosity. What was about to be revealed to them in the mysterious villa? The detective went about from room to room opening doors and flashing his light into every corner. It was a charmingly planned and furnished place and showed every trace of being at present occupied. But the ground floor drew blank.

Sauvage ascended the staircase and stopped outside the first door at the top. It was the room in which the light was burning.

The detective turned the handle and walked inside. It was a large room furnished gorgeously in Eastern

style. Velvety Persian carpets covered the floor and the walls were hung with brass shields and crossed spears and scimitars. The room was in disorder—the carpets twisted crookedly on the smooth parquet flooring, a table overturned and a blue Chinese vase lying smashed in fragments. But on a little inlaid *guéridon* a small brass lamp was burning, throwing a soft faint light that left most of the room in deep shadow. Sauvage flashed his light round and gave a startled exclamation. Lying face downwards on a huge low divan that filled one corner was the figure of a man.

The Inspector rushed forward and turned the figure over. He disclosed the face of a handsome young man of thirty or a little more, with a trim dark moustache. His light waistcoat was deeply stained with blood, and the cushions of the divan were soaked with it. Lying on the divan was a small sharp dagger, with a hilt richly decorated in Oriental style. This the detective picked up.

"*Mon Dieu*—it is the Comte de Peyrac!"

It was Severin-Blanchard who had spoken. He stepped forward and bent over the body to examine it.

"He is dead!" he cried with emotion. "*Mon pauvre jeune ami!* Who can have done this? Ah, my dear friend!"

Sauvage and Antoine looked at each other. Each read the same thought in the eyes of the other. And yet it seemed incredible. Bertoli, of all people—Bertoli, the idol of two continents, an assassin!

Antoine, bewildered, tried to puzzle the mystery out. He had not known what to expect in the quiet villa, but it certainly was not this. What was it—a story of love and jealousy and hate? And the beautiful golden-haired girl—what part had she played in the tragedy?

Sauvage and Severin-Blanchard were now making a

more careful examination of the body. The rest of the group were standing apart, silent and reverential. Suddenly in the quiet room, hushed by the presence of death, a telephone bell rang out, shrill and insistent. It made everybody jump with a disagreeable shock.

The ringing went on, impatient and alarming. The noise came from a far corner of the room. Antoine made a step towards a telephone standing on a wall bracket which everybody now perceived for the first time, but Sauvage brushed past him excitedly and seized the receiver.

"Allo!" he shouted. "Yes. . . . Ah, *mais* . . ." He stopped in the middle of an angry exclamation and looked at Antoine with an expression of the keenest annoyance on his face.

"Somebody is asking for you," he said, handing over the receiver angrily.

"For me!" exclaimed Antoine incredulously. It was the most bewildering incident of the night.

He put the receiver to his ear and heard Bourdot's voice making impatient noises.

"*C'est moi,* Antoine," he called.

"Ah, at last," said Bourdot. "Thank goodness I have got you. I took the chance that you would be inside the villa and rang up. Listen! Bertoli is here. He has appeared after all to-night—over an hour late, but he is singing now. There have been extraordinary scenes! You cannot imagine! Come up at once and ask for the private room of the Comte de Peyrac at the Café de la Paix."

"The Comte de Peyrac—but he is lying dead in this room now," replied Antoine in a hushed voice.

"Dead! Nonsense! I was with him a moment ago and have only just left him to come to the telephone."

"Ah *sais-tu*—I don't know where I am! Then if

yours is the Comte de Peyrac who is this?" There was a buzzing on the line, Bourdot's voice grew faint and died away.

"Ah, was there ever such a vile thing as the Paris telephone system!" cried Antoine.

"But what is it, what is it?" exclaimed Sauvage, anger struggling with his natural professional curiosity.

"It is fantastic, *mon cher Sauvage.* I don't know where to begin. . . . Voilà, Bertoli has appeared at the Opéra after all. He was over an hour late, but he is singing at the present moment. And this unfortunate man here is not the Comte de Peyrac. Who he is I can't tell you. And that is all I know."

He made a rush for the door.

"Where are you going?" cried Sauvage in anguish.

"Back to the Opéra! I want to hear the last of this wonderful performance of Bertoli's." But at the doorway he relented. There was a little debt he owed Sauvage. "If you will leave Pince here and follow on later to *La Lumière* I will let you know anything that occurs. Allons, Durand."

VII

THREE quarters of an hour later Antoine, a little shaken by the night's incidents, stepped into an elegant and cozy apartment on the first floor of the Café de la Paix. The room was empty, but the round table in the center was richly set for supper.

Antoine, restless and excited, went to the window and drew aside the blind. Down the broad steps of the Opéra a crowd was pouring, and the murmur of their voices reached him where he stood. There seemed to

be a thrill of excitement in the air as the multitude spread over the Place de l'Opéra and flowed right and left down the Boulevards.

There was a noise at the door that made Antoine turn. The shocks of the evening were not yet over. Antoine quivered at what he saw. The young man who now entered was apparently none other than the one he had left lying dead on the divan out at Neuilly.

Bourdot entered at the same instant.

"Let me introduce you," he said promptly. "The Comte de Peyrac—Monsieur Antoine Poiret, Director of *La Lumière.*"

"*C'est extraordinaire!*" exclaimed Antoine, staring, fascinated.

The newcomer smiled.

"I am really the Comte de Peyrac. You are not the first who has been astonished on that account. But I think that my troubles in this matter are now at an end. My double will cause me no further worry."

Antoine sat down suddenly.

"Excuse me," he said, "but I have had a very trying evening. But I should like to know all there is to know."

"I am only just disentangling it myself. It is a very extraordinary story."

"If you only knew, Monsieur le Comte, how impatient I am to hear it."

"*Eh bien.* It has got to come out, and you may as well know it early." The Comte paced slowly up and down the room as he talked.

"As you see, I have, or had, a double. The likeness, as I have been made to realize more than once to my cost, is extraordinary. This man, Rogier, was a footman in the house of a friend of mine. It is there, I suppose, that he was able to pick up the usages of

polite society which enabled him successfully on many occasions to pose as myself.

"I will not bother to recount to you the many annoying and occasionally diverting incidents of this long deception. It is enough to say that some time ago Paris became too hot to hold Rogier, and at about the same time that I departed for a voyage in the East he decided to travel a little in America.

"I only arrived back in Paris to-day after an absence of six months, and you must understand that I have only learned all that follows within the past few hours. In America it seems my double, posing as usual as the Comte de Peyrac, made many conquests in love and friendship, and amongst others became intimately acquainted with the great Bertoli. It is quite evident that the famous tenor took a great fancy to the rogue, and I think there is no doubt that on various pretexts he was inclined to advance him large sums of money.

"Not long ago Bertoli met and fell in love with a beautiful American girl. I understand that of a considerable number of affairs of the heart from which the illustrious singer has suffered in his time, this is the only really serious one. She returned his passion and they decided to marry, but for various reasons both were anxious to keep the matter secret for a time. They crossed the Atlantic on the same liner, a matter which caused no comment, and, arrived in London, were married secretly. It seems that in London one can perform such little matters much more quietly and expeditiously than here.

"Bertoli had taken the supposed Comte de Peyrac into his confidence, and the villain had readily offered his help. He had a truly brilliant idea. Bertoli had to come on to Paris to fulfil his engagement. This impostor then suggested that while in Paris, Bertoli and

his bride should use my villa—my villa if you please!—for their honeymoon. The rogue knew it was empty, and that there would be little difficulty about obtaining an entrance. A set of duplicate keys is nothing to such a person. And thus while Bertoli ostensibly stayed at the Hotel Majestic, where he received his friends, he journeyed out every night to my house at Neuilly. It was an admirable arrangement and worked perfectly. A very few people were in the secret, and they kept it religiously. But this very day the happy couple had decided that at last they could give their secret to the world and for the first time they appeared in Paris together."

"I saw her. She is magnificent," said Antoine fervently.

"Then you will appreciate better what follows. My double had, naturally, been a constant visitor to Neuilly. He was the confidant of the happy couple, and they trusted him implicitly. They had, of course, no idea that they were in the hands of a thorough scoundrel.

"Early this evening, then, Bertoli had occasion to be absent from the villa for an hour or more. It was the first time Rogier had really been alone with the lady, and he suddenly made the most violent and passionate love to her. Thunderstruck, she resisted him, but once he had given a glimpse of his true character, the lackey threw off completely the mask of gentleman he had been wearing and behaved openly like the base rascal he is—or was.

"There was a violent struggle in which the terrified young lady found that their dear friend had suddenly become a vicious apache. Luckily she kept her head, and is strong and athletic. And in the struggle she managed to snatch one of my Eastern curios from the

wall and so saved herself from dishonor and rid the world of a villain.

"Imagine the consternation and horror of Bertoli when half an hour later he returned and found the room in disorder, his wife lying in a faint and the supposed Comte de Peyrac lying dead! Imagine the anguish of these two suddenly faced with this appalling position! Imagine if you can—but no, it is not possible—the consternation of these two when suddenly I, the real Comte de Peyrac, bearing a remarkable likeness to the dead man, appear on the scene. I had only arrived in Paris an hour before, and with my valet had immediately gone to Neuilly."

The Comte paused a moment in has pacing of the room and stared before him.

"The scene, *vraiment*, passes imagination! It seemed as though both Bertoli and his wife would go mad. I too was in a state of extreme emotion. But I contained myself and gradually as the truth came home to me, succeeded somewhat in calming them. The knowledge that the dead man was not the Comte de Peyrac but a notorious villain, had, for the moment, a certain bracing effect. Slowly they realized in whose hands they had been—that they were, even, not the guests of the dead man but of myself.

"They put themselves into my hands and begged me to help them. I said that if he could possibly bring himself to do it Bertoli ought to appear at the Opéra to-night. For a long time he resisted the idea fiercely, but his wife joined her entreaties to mine, and at last he consented. The three of us came back to Paris and he appeared as you know more than an hour late. It was announced from the stage that he had been detained by a motor accident, but had insisted on appearing in spite of grave difficulties. And, *mon Dieu*, the recep-

tion he got! And *sapristi!*—how he sang! Never before has his glorious voice throbbed with such passion and feeling. The house was delirious."

The Comte sat down. Antoine drew a long breath. To think that the quiet villa at Neuilly had been the scene of such a drama during the past few hours.

"And Madame?" he asked softly.

"I took her to a very quiet and discreet hotel. She has had a sleeping draught and is now in the hands of an excellent doctor. As to the rest the police have been informed. They and Bertoli may be here at any moment."

"There is one further point. Why have the police been watching your villa so closely during the past three weeks?"

"I heard of that a little while ago. The Opéra authorities had become a little disquieted as to Bertoli's mysterious movements, and I imagine that it was on their account that the police were active."

The door opened and Bertoli himself entered followed by a number of gentlemen in evening dress. The famous singer looked suddenly older. His face bore lines of suffering, and he seemed like a man suffering from an intense shock.

It was no scene to intrude upon. Antoine gave a sign to Bourdot and they passed out.

On the stairs they met Sauvage, Pince and another detective hurrying up. The inspector saluted them coldly and passed on without a word.

In the cab Antoine leaned back wearily.

"Say then, *mon ami*, was it this morning or a hundred years ago that Morissot fought his duel with Dupuy?"

"It has been a wonderful day. And now for the task of writing about it. Columns and columns! It is glo-

rious—but there is a lot of work ahead," Bourdot sighed.

"Durand is waiting at the office to help. We will send out for champagne and something to eat."

"All the same we shan't be able to get it into print before five o'clock."

"*Qu'importe!* Paris will read it to-day, and that is all that matters. And, mon Dieu, what a story!"

VIII

Severin-Blanchard called at the office of *La Lumière* on the following afternoon to give his warmest congratulations.

"My eyes started from my head this morning when I read *La Lumière,*" he exclaimed. "*Dieu, quelle histoire!* To think all that happened in what we thought was an empty villa. And *saves vous*—it has been of the greatest help to me. I am writing a new farce which is long overdue. I had arrived at the third act and I was stuck—*ciel!* how I was stuck! I was in a hole, an oubliette, and could not get out. I had racked my brains for a month and nothing came of them. And now this wonderful business has given me my idea, the very idea I was looking for but could not find. The farce is as good as finished."

"After tragedy—farce. It is always like that in life," said Antoine. "And the diamond ring?"

"*Nom d'un nom*—I have never thought about it from that moment to this! The poor Dupuy—his fever will mount higher and higher. I must be off at once."

CHAPTER VII

THE GREATEST ADVENTURE

I

To the Frenchman returning from abroad to the only country that really matters to him, Marseilles, though not to be compared to the splendid capital, is an excellent second—a sort of worthy cousin with a marked family resemblance to incomparable Paris.

Some such idea as this flitted through the mind of Monsieur Etienne Robespierre, savant and famous Egyptologist, as he sat before a bright café in the stately Cannebière. Even the most loyal of Parisians will admit that the Cannebière is a fine boulevard, and M. Robespierre looked with keen pleasure and interest on the prosperous and well-dressed *Marseillais* who passed up and down before him in the main thoroughfare of their ancient city.

He had only landed late the night before after a long stay in Egpyt, and it was good to feel himself back in France again. A lifelong study of an ancient civilization had by no means dulled his interest in the people of his own day. On the contrary he thrilled responsively to this crisp activity of his own kind after his long poring and delving amid the remains of a bygone civilization. And that morning he would board the P. L. M. rapide, and by midnight find himself back in

his beloved Paris. Then to his comfortable little flat in the Rue du Cherche Midi, surrounded by a thousand objects that were dear to him. The thought was good to dwell upon.

In the very best of humors he sipped his cool and golden bock. It was a hot morning, the last day of July. The newspapers which he had been reading lay before him on the little table. They contained matters of grave import, but somehow on this sparkling morning, with all these unconcerned and happy-looking people passing up and down in the sunshine, M. Robespierre could not take them seriously. No, no! Such storms had blown up in Europe before. This one would pass away, as so many others had done before it. War? Impossible! What did a happy world want with such a monstrous thing?

But as he looked contentedly before him another expression came into his keen and mobile face. On the pavement, strolling slowly past the café were two young men, at sight of whim M. Robespierre's thoughts turned into quite another path.

The taller of the two was none other than Prince Ernst of Saxe-Wolmar, half cousin, and so it was generally said, a warm favorite of that same potentate whose demeanor Europe was now watching with the greatest anxiety. The second young man was Count von Gassner, travelling companion of the Prince.

They had been together in Cairo, where there had been some little wonderment as to why the Prince should be there so very far out of the season. His stay had been made as pleasant as possible under the circumstances and there were even stories that he had tried to make too much of the hospitality shown him, but this, it was argued by some, was only to be expected in the case of a Prince abroad, and a German one at that.

M. Robespierre during his stay in Cairo had been fully conversant with the Prince's visit and his doings, and, like everybody else, understood that a day or so before his own departure, the Prince and his companion had left in their steam yacht for a cruise in Greek and Turkish waters. Then why this unlooked for appearance in Marseilles? That was the question, in view of what he had read in the papers, that occurred at once to M. Robespierre.

The two stopped in their walk and then sat down on the café terrace, at a table just near him.

"It is pleasant here," said the Prince. "I would willingly stay on a little in Marseilles. . . . But this is not quite the time for it now." And he laughed.

"What time do we get to Paris—midnight, is it not?" said the other.

The Prince nodded.

"Our stay there, too, will be short. But let us hope we shall have more leisure for a visit a little later on."

The two exchanged smiles. Their conversation had been in German, a language with which M. Robespierre, much against his natural inclinations, had a considerable acquaintance.

There was something about what he had heard which struck him as disagreeable, even sinister. The laugh of the Prince, the smile which the two men had exchanged, seemed to be charged with some definite meaning.

And after all, sunshine or not, the newspapers had never within his memory, with the exception perhaps of the disasters of *l'année terrible* over forty years before, contained such grave news as that which he had read within the last hour or so. He picked one up and cast his eye over it again. His glance fell on a telegram dated the night before from Vienna.

"During the course of the evening," it ran, "the French, British and Russian Ambassadors have all called on the Minister for Foreign Affairs, and had long interviews with him. Their demeanor as they left gave little cause for optimism. It is reported that during the day the German Ambassador was received by the aged Emperor. The general impression here is that matters have now gone so far that only something like a miracle can avert the threatened catastrophe."

"*Bon Dieu!*" exclaimed M. Robespierre. He had read that message before during the morning, and had tried to dismiss it from his mind as the effort of a journalist making the most of an exciting situation. But now, somehow, he saw it in quite another light. Its gravity could not be ignored. He had a feeling of impending trouble, and the sunlight on the Boulevard seemed suddenly colder.

There has been a hint of a European crisis when he left Egypt, but it had developed swiftly during his voyage, and that was perhaps why he had not at first been sufficiently receptive to what the newspapers told him. But now he had no illusions as to the gravity of the moment. The Prince's change of plans—if it was a change—and his hurried journey northwards were enough. M. Robespierre felt as if he had received a cold douche.

After a little while the Prince and his companion rose and left. M. Robespierre, with surprising activity for one of his years, jumped up a moment later and hastened to the nearest telegraph office. He and the Prince were travelling to Paris on the same train. It had occurred to him that it would be as well to send a telegram to his friends on *La Lumière*.

II

Antoine and Bourdot went to the Gare de Lyon to meet M. Robespierre. Paris was electric with anxiety and suspense, and in every newspaper office people were standing about in groups awaiting the latest news and discussing the situation earnestly. But M. Robespierre held such a high place in the regard of the three directors of *La Lumière* that they would have put anything aside to meet him. As their companion in the adventure at Monte Carlo which had resulted in their succession to the control of the paper, they felt they owed him a great deal. Only the great pressure of the moment had prevented Morissot from coming to the station also. . . . And besides M. Robespierre's telegram had aroused a certain amount of curiosity in the minds of Antoine and his *confrères*.

The meeting was a most cordial one. M. Robespierre hopped out of the long train like a young man in his thirties. They complimented him on his vigor and youthful appearance.

"And *La Lumière, eh?*" exclaimed M. Robespierre. "It goes splendidly, does it not? I have been able to perceive that even amidst my mummies. . . . But tell me, things are grave, are they not? Is it really as bad as it seems? Understand, I am out of touch a little."

"We are hoping the incredible will not happen," said Antoine gravely. "But that is all."

"Ha! And so that is how you feel in Paris! Your tone is enough to tell me. I have also had something to think about on the journey up from Marseilles. My telegram hinted that I had something to tell you, eh? You see those two men who have just stepped out of the door there? The first, the tall fair one, is Prince

Ernst of Saxe-Wolmar, first favorite of the great War Lord. The other does not matter. But I have something to say to you about this Prince. You will perhaps appreciate what it means better than I." And M. Robespierre told them what he had overheard.

"What do you think?" he asked, when he had finished.

"At an ordinary time one would think little or nothing," said Antoine. "But now—it may mean anything. *Non, vraiment*, I do not like it! A short stay in Paris now, but more leisure for a visit later on! It seems to me to have a sinister meaning."

"So I thought," said M. Robespierre, with some satisfaction.

"That well-dressed young man who has just gone up to greet them is a secretary at the German Embassy. I know him well by sight," Bourdot said.

"We must keep our eye on this Prince Ernst." Antoine was tugging at his beard, his eye fixed on the royal visitor who was chatting now with the secretary. "M. Robespierre, you understand German. Why not go to the same hotel as the Prince? Bourdot shall follow them in a taxi. You come on with me to the office with your luggage, and when Bourdot has found out which hotel it is, you go there and keep an eye on his royal highness. I will come with you. What do you say?"

M. Robespierre thought regretfully for a moment of his comfortable flat which he was so anxious to see again, but it was only for a moment.

"*Bien!* You are right. They will perhaps be off before I can have collected my luggage. Let Bourdot secure a taxi, and wait for them. You, mon cher Antoine, come and help me to collect my luggage. There is quite a lot of it."

It was half an hour before they were able to leave the station, with the bulk of Robespierre's luggage left behind in the cloak room.

At the offices of *La Lumière* they found Morissot reading the proof of an article on the latest phase of the international situation. He broke off to welcome M. Robespierre enthusiastically.

"It seems a long time ago since we found you, furious, in the police station at Dijon," said Morissot, with one of his rare laughs.

The little Egyptologist laughed heartily.

"I have often thought of it, out amidst my tombs. And that Commissaire, *hein?* What a perfect, what a beautiful liar he was! *Mais quel aplomb!*"

They were deep in the enjoyment of this souvenir of their first meeting when Bourdot entered. His appearance brought them back to realities.

"What hotel?" asked Antoine.

"The Grand Imperial."

"Isn't that the hotel where the famous Kastner is manager?"

"The same. And the good Kastner bowed his forehead to the ground when the Prince entered."

"A perfect nest of them," said M. Robespierre acidly. "It goes against my inclinations to be near them. But I have done it before in the cause of science, and I can do it again in the cause of France. Come, we will be off immediately. It is late."

They drove off at once. In spite of the late hour there were many people still about the streets, and on the terraces of the cafés others were sitting. Paris was too excited, too intensely interested to think of going to bed.

Their taxi hummed swiftly up the broad Champs Elysées. It was after one o'clock when they arrived

in the sumptuous entrance hall of the Grand Imperial. A massive hotel porter whose countenance, in their present mood, seemed to shout Teutonism to the visitors, received them deferentially. The visitors' book was handed to them, and the two scanned it with the keenest interest. Von Gassner's name was there, but the Prince's identity was concealed under a title which, scrawled hurriedly, it was difficult to make out.

"We may be here only a few days," said Antoine, "but we should like if possible a large salon with two bedrooms opening off it."

The functionary consulted a list.

"Bien, Messieurs. We have such a suite on the first floor. Your luggage shall be sent up immediately. I will take you up."

They entered a lift, and a few moments later were shown into a large room furnished in the quiet but sumptuous style of a first-class modern hotel-de-luxe.

"I know it is very late," said Antoine. "But would it be possible to have something to eat? Anything—cold chicken, a bottle of white wine—anything you can find."

The Teutonic hall porter promised that he would do what was possible, and withdrew.

"Judging by the numbers," said Antoine, "we must be somewhere near our friends. I took that chance in asking for a large salon . . . And it will do no harm to eat something. At any rate it gives us the chance to be up and active."

"Excellent! And I am hungry. One always is after leaving a train. And there is much that we can talk about."

Their conversation fell on the one possible topic, and Antoine acquainted his friend in full with the latest developments of the situation which a few days before

had seemed but one of Europe's periodical crises, to be passed after the usual negotiations of the diplomatists, but now filled every heart with foreboding. They were in the middle of their conversation when a waiter entered with a tray and busied himself with laying the table. Antoine looked at the man as he worked silently and rapidly.

"Good evening, Labiche," said Antoine quietly.

The waiter jumped as if struck and looked at Antoine with an expression of amazement in his eyes. Then he turned to the table again with an affectation of carelessness.

"Pardon, Monsieur, but my name is Prunier," he said and went on with his work.

"An excellent French name, and surprising enough to find in a German hotel," said Antoine. "But I have a good memory for names and faces . . . It is perhaps three or four years ago: I happened to be present at the Seine Assize Court, interested as a spectator in a certain case. There was an *agent des mœurs* who gave evidence concerning a certain person who not long before, I had every reason to believe, had skilfully relieved me of my pocketbook in a Montmartre night café. It was entirely owing to your evidence I remember, that the lady received six months' imprisonment on another charge . . . You have traveled far since then no doubt."

"Who are you?" said the waiter bluntly looking Antoine straight in the eyes.

"My name is Poiret. I am Director of *La Lumière*."

"Ah! I have heard of you."

"From our mutual friend, Inspector Sauvage?" inquired Antoine.

The waiter ignored the question.

"I am no longer a police agent," he said. "I have been here over a year. I am now a waiter."

"Nonsense," said Antoine, pleasantly but with decision.

The two men stared hard at each other. Labiche appeared to be thinking hard. Then he became the waiter again.

"If Monsieur will excuse me I will now fetch your supper," he said, and left the room.

The old savant gripped Antoine by the arm.

"When one is with you extraordinary things happen apparently," he said. "What do you make of it. You order supper. A waiter appears. And he proves to be a detective. *Hein?*"

"At any rate he is a French detective," said Antoine. "It seems to me that quite possibly our friends the police are more interested in Herr Kastner's existence than he is probably aware of. Perhaps it was unwise of me to speak to Labiche like that but I did it impulsively. And one never knows. It may be for the best."

"And you think this man Labiche is specially interested in the Prince?"

"I should think it unlikely. He says he has been here a year. He therefore lives here on general principles and quite possibly has no knowledge of the sudden arrival of the royal visitor."

The waiter appeared again with another tray. He set the supper and announced that all was ready. The two friends sat down.

They ate with Labiche in attendance on them. He was an excellent waiter. M. Robespierre talked freely of his latest work in Egypt, and for the time being, affairs of greater moment were left on one side. Supper over, Labiche made several journeys from the room, and finally stood at the door.

"*Bonsoir, messieurs.*"

"*Bonsoir, et merci.*"

Labiche stood a moment irresolute.

"You will readily understand," he said, addressing Antoine, "that it would not be good for my work as a waiter here if it were known that I had been in certain other employment. There are very few Frenchmen employed in this hotel. I obtained my own situation with considerable difficulty. Monsieur will understand that discretion . . ."

"These are grave times, Labiche," said Antoine looking hard at the other. "They are times when every Frenchman must be loyal to every other."

"*Parfaitement.*" The waiter bowed and closed the door behind him.

M. Robespierre looked at his watch.

"My friend, I am extremely tired," he exclaimed. "I think we had better go to bed. There is nothing to be gained by stopping up."

"You are right," said Antoine. "At any rate I think we shall sleep nearer to the heart of things tonight than most people in Paris."

III

With one possible exception the Grand Imperial was the most expensive hotel in Paris. But in return for its charges it tried to give its guests the benefit of every modern convenience, and when Antoine awoke somewhere about eight o'clock the first thing he noticed was a telephone within easy reach of his hand.

He unhooked the receiver and rang up the office, giving a message that when Bourdot and Durand came in they should be requested to call on him at the hotel.

And just after Antoine and M. Robespierre had finished a light breakfast the man of fashion and the office investigator both appeared.

"Nothing has happened," said Antoine. "We are staying on the same floor as his Royal Highness, that is all. He is along the corridor there, in the next suite. There is just one point." And he mentioned his discovery of Labiche.

"I remember him well," broke in Durand. "It is true . . . I have not seen him about for a long time . . . After all, a Paris hotel is the last place one Parisian would meet another."

"Labiche is not really in Paris at all," said Antoine. The others looked at him in surprise. "He is in Germany. So are we all in this room. Half an hour ago I walked along the corridor. I saw a bullet-headed waiter coming out of the rooms of our Prince. I walked down to the entrance hall to buy the morning papers. The great Kastner himself was just crossing it, and he stopped to speak to an under-manager who has certainly modeled his moustache on the Kaiser's. And the porter who sent a page boy for me to the newspaper kiosk might have been a Prussian guardsman. One does not notice these things so closely at ordinary times, but during my little promenade I felt that I had crossed the Rhine . . . And now, *mes amis*, I suggest that as unobtrusively as possible you two make this place a sort of headquarters for the time being. Between you there are few notable people in Paris you do not know something about. We may be sure this Prince is not here as a mere Teuton tourist. He is travelling incognito and with the situation as it is he would be hurrying on to Germany if he had not some good reason for staying. We must try and manage that as little as possible happens in this hotel that we

do not know about. We have had many interesting experiences together on *La Lumière* but this should easily exceed them all."

"Good," said Durand. "I will begin with the American Bar and make myself at home there." And he went out.

M. Robespierre had sat very quiet during all this. There was a hint of amusement in his keen eyes as he spoke following Durand's departure.

"All this is very exciting, mon cher Antoine. But I confess I do not see where you are to begin. And back in Paris on this bright July morning, with the pleasant hum of the Champs Elysées below . . . somehow I cannot feel that the world is thinking of plunging into war. Nor can I quite feel that this luxurious but otherwise quite ordinary hotel is the home of international plots. Perhaps it is that I am so much out of touch, or that I am itching to see my old flat in the Rue du Cherche Midi. I think I will go there."

Antoine smiled.

"You said yourself last night that extraordinary things seem to happen when I am about. It has been noticed before. But when you go out you will feel that something extraordinary is happening everywhere, to everybody all around you. For a week past this tension has been growing. We have had crises before, but never one that felt like this. There is not one reasonable being in Paris at this moment who is not talking about one thing—does it mean war? And most of us are convinced against all our hopes and wishes that it does. A week ago nobody would have dreamed that a wrangle in the Balkans would mean war for Europe. But the crisis instead of diminishing has intensified with every hour. To-day there is hardly a single individual in touch with affairs who thinks that we have

the slightest chance of escaping war—the war of millions that has been talked about for years past, but which nobody has ever really visualized. Now we know we are on the very edge of it. To-morrow we may be in it . . . And I feel that the last push may just as likely come from within this hotel as from anywhere else."

Antoine had spoken very quietly but the old gentleman looked very thoughtful.

"You impress me, in spite of myself," he said. "I don't want to believe you . . . but you almost make me. I will go out all the same, and I shall return here some time during the day."

"What do you propose to do," asked Bourdot after the Egyptologist had left them. "The situation does not seem very clear to me."

"As you say it is a little vague," said Antoine. "There is nothing to tell us where to begin, or on what. But it occurs to me . . . the Prince has telephones in his rooms, as we have here. He is staying incognito. It is more than likely that he will send or receive messages by that means . . . If only we could tap his wires."

"Yes, but how?"

"Yes, how? Listen, Bourdot. There is that excellent man Georges who does all the electrical work in our offices. He is of good presence. You must go and find him and bring him here. Tell him only just as much as is necessary and be back with him as early as possible this afternoon. I suggest that you put him in one of your suits and attend to his toilet as far as is necessary. He must not, of course, suggest the workman when he comes here. Let him bring whatever may be required—wire, a portable telephone—anything. Buy him a neat little leather case for those and his

tools. The idea is that he will have to try and guess from inside these rooms where the wire runs to the Prince's apartment, and tap it. Explain that as well as you can to him—you have a general idea as to how the rooms run. Offer him a thousand francs if necessary. And if he can't do it in his disguise as a gentleman we shall have to see what can be done by means of his boldly invading the royal presence as a simple telephone employee, who is examining the instrument. There is no risk. Only a little bluff is needed. . . . I think that is all for the moment. You can do this, *mon vieux* Bourdot?"

"I have done many curious things for you," said Bourdot. "No doubt I shall be able to manage this also. . . . I should not have the slightest belief in your scheme—except that I have known others just as extraordinary to succeed."

"Mon cher ami, the great Danton was wonderfully right. Audacity always succeeds. So many people live by convention that they are always out-manoeuvred by the few who depart from the rules. And now that this point is settled I know what my next move is."

"And what may it be?" asked Bourdot.

"Lunch," said Antoine.

IV

Monsieur Robespierre heaved a little sigh of relief and content as he stepped out of the hotel into the open air and sunshine. His homecoming had been shorn of its expected joy and welcome. When working in the fierce light and heat of Egypt his thoughts constantly dwelt on his cool and comfortable flat, with its innumerable souvenirs, precious or sentimental, of his long

and busy life. He had lived there over thirty years and had no desire to live anywhere else. His short stay in the big hotel had bored him, as being a sheer waste of valuable time. The atmosphere of plot and suspicion had not impressed so much as irritated him. He was nostalgic for his own mellow haunts, and the night in the severely modern hotel with his own home so near had been a burden on his mind and heart.

His spirits revived wonderfully as he walked briskly down the slope of the Champs Elysées. Paris smiled her old welcome to him, as she had done so many times before after his periodical absences. There was so far nothing to show that she had a care on her mind. Her mood was apparently his own—one of lightness and content. The swift motor traffic whirled joyously up and down the broad avenue whose polished surface, burnished by innumerable wheels, threw back the morning sun as from a mirror.

Swinking his cane he arrived, without slackening his pace, at the Place de la Concorde, dodged with extraordinary agility the bewildering traffic that shot across it from all directions, crossed the river, his eye lighting up at the splendid prospect of the quais that opened before him, and continued on his way through the quarter of Paris he loved best.

A little later he turned into the dark entrance to the old-fashioned but comfortable apartment which for so long had been his home. He saw his old concierge sitting in her lodge, and thought with some pleasure of the surprise his sudden appearance in the doorway would give. To his amazement old Mme. Villon merely looked up and holding out an envelope which she had just picked up from the table said:

"Here is a letter for you, Monsieur. It was left here an hour ago with the strictest injunctions that I must

let you have it the moment you came in. It is very important."

The returned exile was very much taken aback.

"*Sapristi!* Is that how you greet your old *locataire* after such a long absence?" he exclaimed.

Mme. Villon gave a little cry.

"But if it is not Monsieur Robespierre! Welcome! A thousand welcomes! For the moment, as you stood there with your back to the light, I thought it was Monsieur Haase . . ."

"A German! It is nothing but Germans!" exclaimed the old gentleman, considerably nettled. "My key, quick! I am impatient to see my *appartement*."

He seized the key himself from the nail where he knew it hung, and ran lightly upstairs, paying no heed to something Mme. Villon called after him.

He heaved a sigh of content as he stepped again into his own abode. It was an unsuspected treasure-house in the midst of Paris. He sat down in a favorite arm-chair and slowly surveyed his precious belongings. Everything was as he had left it on his last departure for Egypt—to be arrested a few hours afterwards by that mutton-headed Police Commissary at Dijon.

As he sat there he became aware of the letter in his hand which in the excitement of his homecoming he had for the moment forgotten. Much to his surprise he saw that the envelope bore the name of the hotel he had just left.

"Extraordinary," he murmured. "One cannot escape these Germans. They seem to follow me about."

He had a sudden desire to know what was in the letter, and acting on the impulse opened it. The name Haase on the envelope justified anything, and in any case this was hardly the time to bother too much about the niceties of conduct.

What he saw inside, written in German, surprised him still more. The letter was signed by von Gassner. It ran:

"Events are impending which make it absolutely necessary for you to get into immediate touch with your former friends. These instructions have been received from the highest quarters. His Royal Highness, Prince Ernst of Saxe-Wolmar, wishes you to be here at ten o'clock to-night. If you give your name at the bureau you will be conducted to him immediately. The affair is important and urgent."

M. Robespierre whistled softly to himself. He became aware that Mme. Villon was standing behind his chair, talking rapidly. She had apparently been talking to him for some little time.

"At first sight you are really quite alike, and when you stood there in the doorway I thought for the moment that you were M. Haase . . ."

"Who *is* this individual you are talking about?" demanded the old gentleman raspingly.

"The new tenant. He has been here six months."

"What is he like?"

"He is a very pleasant gentleman."

"Does he receive many letters?"

"Very few indeed."

"Listen, Mme. Villon. You have known me a long time. I have known you a long time. There can be perfect confidence between us. And I have arrived here just in time to discover that something dangerous—something peculiar—is happening. The whole point is to keep the police away from this place."

Mme. Villon's eyes widened. M. Robespierre's manner was very impressive, even a little alarming.

"What is it?" she quavered.

"I cannot tell you at the moment. But the point is

that for the time being at any rate you must not mention this letter to Herr Haase. He is a German. Do not forget that. You must preserve absolute silence on the matter. Do you understand me?"

"Perfectly, M. Robespierre."

"That is well, then. Understand, the greatest discretion. There are the gravest reasons for it. I will tell you more later. For the moment you must leave me to think the matter out."

M. Robespierre's face relaxed into a smile as the old dame went out. But he was immediately grave again. There was something urgent and serious afoot here. He remembered Antoine's calm but telling exposition of the situation that morning. Truly he felt crisis in the air now. Here was something to tell Antoine. He must get back to the hotel as quickly as possible.

Some time later in the afternoon Antoine sat in his bedroom at the hotel with a telephone receiver to his ear. Behind him stood an individual of rather ambiguous presence. He was attired in frock coat, striped trousers, patent boots and spats, but there was something about him which did not quite accord with his imposing exterior.

"It should be all right," he was saying, a little anxiously. "I feel sure I have tapped the right wire."

Antoine made a motion with his hand. Then he laid the receiver down and turned to the electrician.

"You have," he said. "Somebody has just telephoned down to the entrance hall to ask for the evening papers to be sent up. I heard every word quite clearly."

"Then there is nothing more to be done, Monsieur Antoine?"

"No, many thanks. I think that is all, Georges. It is excellently done. If there is any need to call on you again I shall know where to find you."

And the electrician, putting on a glossy tall hat and picking up a small leather case, departed.

"That is good so far as it goes," murmured Antoine to himself as he regarded the illicit telephone. "The point is, how far will it go. . . . I too, by the way, will ask for the evening papers."

When they came up he saw that all were concentrating on the desperate efforts being made by England to call an eleventh hour conference of the Powers with the hope of avoiding the catastrophe of war. There was little hope expressed that such a conference would be convened, or that it would do any good if it were.

He was disturbed by the ring of a telephone bell. He ran to the bedroom, but discovered that it was his own instrument that was ringing and not the one connected with the Prince's suite.

"Is that you, Antoine?" said a voice. "This is Robespierre. I want you to take a taxi and come to my rooms as soon as possible."

"But, mon ami, I don't wish to leave here."

"It is imperative. I have something most important to tell you, but it cannot be done on the telephone. Cannot you arrange with Bourdot? You can be back in half an hour. I should have communicated with you before, but I have been deep in my papers. Then I thought of the telephone. I am in a chemist's shop. It is imperative that you should come."

"If it is so important, then. I will see Bourdot and start at once."

In the hall Antoine discovered the man of fashion reading a paper and keeping an eye open on all that was going on round him.

"Sit on guard over the telephone," said Antoine, after explaining why he had to go out. "If there is any call

on the Prince's line the instrument will ring. I shall be back immediately."

Antoine discovered M. Robespierre sitting at a desk deep in his papers. He exclaimed at the many beautiful things he saw around him.

"It is a corner of ancient Egypt," he said.

"Yes, and some day I will explain everything to you. But for the moment listen to what I have to tell you." And he recounted the incident of the letter intended for his double.

"But this is amazing," cried Antoine. "We are certainly on the track of something important. And who is this Herr Haase?"

"I have not the slightest idea. I only know from what my concierge has told me, that he has not been in Germany for a long time. It is just possible that the Prince does not know him by sight."

"And Herr Haase is commanded to meet the Prince at ten to-night. And he has not received the summons, but you have."

Antoine spoke slowly, as if underlining his words. The two men looked steadily at each other for a moment.

"It had occurred to me that I might take his place," said M. Robespierre calmly.

"That is splendid of you," cried Antoine. "I knew you would say so."

"There is just this one point. I may already have been noticed in the hotel."

"I thought of that at once. But after all, only the night porter saw you enter. To-day you descended the stairs once to go out—it is very likely that in the bustle of the place nobody noticed you. And again, it is not certain that the people at the hotel know Herr Haase."

"My thoughts had run on exactly the same lines.

But I would give much to know who Herr Haase is."

"I think I shall be able to help you there. Immediately on returning I will send Durand to the Prefecture—to the Prefect of Police himself—to find out all that can be found about him. They are sure to have some sort of dossier on him. I think the Prefect will help, if circumstances allow him. We have been very friendly since a certain little affair in which we met some time ago."

"That is good. But how shall I learn what you have found out?"

"You will come to the hotel in a taxicab. Stop it a few yards before you reach the hotel and remain inside. One of us will come to you and tell you anything we know. At a quarter to ten, say."

"*Bien.* That is all for the moment, then. I have much more to occupy me. And wish me luck when I beard *Messieurs les Allemands* in their den to-night."

"We shall be near you," said Antoine. They shook hands and he descended to his waiting taxi.

He found Bourdot in a state of open excitement when he re-entered his rooms at the hotel.

"There is news," announced the man of fashion, with importance. "Your great telephone idea has already justified itself. There was a ring. I listened. Somebody from the Prince's suite was speaking to somebody else. Who else I could not say. But the voice of this other person seemed familiar to me. And suddenly I recognized it—a peculiar voice, unmistakable. Guess who it was."

"But who? Quick! How could I tell you?"

"It was the voice of Schultze, first secretary at the German Embassy. I have talked with him many a time. Say, then, is it not extraordinary how my experience of fashionable Paris . . ."

"But, *voyons,* Bourdot! I will talk to you about your duchesses another time. What is the news?"

"But consider. If I had not recognized that voice . . ."

"True! True! You are right. It is extraordinary. And the news?" Antoine was dancing with excitement.

"Well, as far as I could make out from the conversation there is to be an important reunion here at the hotel to-night. And apparently somebody very important is to be here—I think there is no doubt it is the German Ambassador. Is that interesting, *hein?*"

"I should say it is. It may mean anything. You will agree when I tell you what I have just heard." And he told him of M. Robespierre and his double.

"The storm is blowing up, mon cher Bourdot. And we are on the spot. The telephone was a great idea, eh! And now I want you to find Durand down below. I must send him to the Prefecture. I will write a note while you are finding him. Observe once more how useful was that little affair of the studio in the Rue Tartarin. The Prefect has been our friend ever since. He loved that little joke."

Antoine scribbled a hasty note to the Prefect, explaining that for urgent private and patriotic reasons he wished to know anything there was to know concerning Herr Haase, an elderly German gentleman who lived in the Rue de Cherche Midi. He was sealing up the letter when Durand came in. Antoine explained the matter in a few words, and Durand departed.

Bourdot returned to his post of observation down below. Antoine sat with an ear turned towards the telephone, but nothing happened. As some relief from inaction he rang up Morissot at the office and asked if there was any later news on the situation.

"No change," he reported, "or if there is, it is a shade more pessimistic. It will be war—one can see no way out of it. There is one thing to be said—for the first time in my experience the Government is more or less behaving as a government should."

"That is something to be thankful for," said Antoine with a chuckle.

"Mind you, I am not saying they have really done anything yet," put in Morissot hastily. "But one really has some hopes that they will."

"I am relieved to find that you are not *too* enthusiastic," laughed Antoine. "I should not like to see too violent a change in you."

The chat with Morissot put him in a good humor. Shortly afterwards Durand came in on his return from the Prefecture.

"The Prefect was all that could be wished," he said. "He knew all about Herr Haase without having to consult any documents. His real name is Baron von Kuhling."

"The name seems familiar."

"Yes. You will remember that some twelve years ago there was a very nasty court scandal in Berlin. It is supposed that to save others more exalted Kuhling was made a sort of scapegoat. He belongs to one of Bavaria's oldest families, but he was banished—kicked out of Germany. He has lived chiefly in France ever since, mostly on the Riviera. Less than a year ago he settled down in Paris. He is not really so old as he looks—the affair evidently made a heavy mark on him. There is nothing known against him. He lives a quiet, retired life, under his assumed name, and is an ardent collector of prints and engravings dealing with the French Revolution. That is all that is known about him, the Prefect says."

"Not a very terrible record," murmured Antoine. "There are degrees, even amongst Germans."

V

M. Robespierre's taxi drew up a hundred yards short of the hotel. A few minutes later Antoine's face appeared in the open window. He entered and immediately explained what he had heard concerning Herr Haase.

"I remember the scandal very well," remarked the old gentleman. "I can only hope for his sake that he was really the victim of his friends and not of his acts."

"You will have other distinguished company this evening, besides the Prince," said Antoine. And he explained what Bourdot had heard on the telephone.

"The German Ambassador, eh! It sounds very grave. I wonder what it is they have in hand. And I wonder what they require of Herr Haase. Anyhow there is nothing now but to go and see. I should imagine that he is a man with a grievance. I shall let them do the talking. Anyhow it gives me a feeling of security to know that you can listen to anything they may say on the telephone."

They talked for some time longer, examining the affair from all possible points of view. Then Antoine with a last fervent handshake got out and the taxi drove to the hotel door.

At the hotel bureau M. Robespierre breathed the name he was supposed to bear. A dapper young man, who looked as though he might be a private secretary, and who had apparently been waiting, came forward.

"You are expected upstairs," he said. "Will you come with me."

M. Robespierre followed his guide without a word, noting as he mounted the staircase that Bourdot was sitting, apparently languid and bored, in the hall. He smiled to himself as the guide conducted him past his own bedroom.

A moment later and he was ushered through a door which was guarded on the inside by a large screen. As he stepped from behind this he found himself before the Prince, who was pacing the room, cigarette in his hand. The Prince came forward quickly, and held out his hand. The visitor, after a little gesture of hesitation, took it.

"I am very glad to see you, Baron," said the Prince, speaking in German. "It is many years since we met."

"Yes. And it is so many years since I spoke German that I should prefer to speak in French, and to be addressed by the name I am here known by," replied M. Robespierre.

"Ah! I quite understand." There was just a shade of annoyance in the Prince's tone. "Naturally. No doubt in your case I should say the same, Herr . . . Monsieur Haase." The Prince sat down. "Please be seated."

"You will perhaps wonder why I desired you should come and see me," the Prince went on.

The visitor inclined his head.

"There is no need for me to insist on the tension which prevails in Europe. War is, apparently, inevitable. And at this great moment in our history Germany has need of your services—as she has need of every good German's services."

M. Robespierre was still silent. The Prince looked at him for a few moments before saying with deliberation.

"If the crisis develops as it is doing it is possible that to-morrow the German Ambassador will leave Paris. Those who know the situation best believe this to be

almost certain. But though many of us will leave by that train some will be left behind. You are one of those who can serve us best by doing so. I am authorized to tell you that when the war is over and we are victorious the Emperor will be glad graciously to pardon you and reinstate you in your former position."

M. Robespierre appeared to be thinking deeply.

"In what way can I serve?" he finally asked in a low voice.

The Prince stood up erect and rigid and looked down on his visitor.

"First of all *will* you serve?" he demanded majestically.

The other's eyes flashed as he returned the Prince's gaze boldly.

"I am willing to serve my country against her enemies in any way possible, with or without reward," was the reply.

"That is well spoken," cried the Prince. "The Emperor will know how to reward. I may tell you that here, in this hotel, I am in direct wireless communication with Germany. The good Kastner understands other things than how to run an hotel. And your name has been specifically put forward. I received a message only last night telling me to call on your help . . ."

"And how am I to serve?" broke in the other.

"In this way, mon cher Baron. History is to repeat itself, as it has done so many times before. Bismarck, when he altered the famous Ems despatch, cast the odium of the last war on to France. You will remember it well. We are to do the same thing again, in another way. To-morrow our Ambassador will leave Paris. There is to be a simulated attempt on his life as he enters the train—he is not to be hurt, of course—and you are the chosen instrument to do it."

"But why?"

"It is simple, but very subtle. No other man could possibly serve us so well. We want an *agent provocateur*—but he must not be a renegade Frenchman. It would be too obvious that we had employed him. But you are a German nobleman with a grievance—a legitimate grievance, let us say—who for many years has been enjoying the hospitality of the French. And if you try to shoot the German Ambassador—why, nobody would think for a moment of seeing in it the hand of Germany. But we could make the very most of the fact that a man enjoying the protection of the French had tried to assassinate the German Ambassador at the moment he was leaving French soil. France would start the war, as she did before, under a great moral disadvantage. You can see the shock of horror that would run round the world—the anger against France that such a thing could happen. And England, moral and righteous England," the Prince paused to laugh heartily, "would think very, very seriously about joining forces with such a country. . . . Now do you begin to see?"

"It is wonderful," murmured the other, his eyes set in a fixed stare. "It is colossal."

"I may say that the idea was largely my own," pursued the Prince, in the best of humors. "As for you, there will be no danger. The French will see in you merely a German suffering from a long-seated grievance, a long-nursed idea of wrong. You will be arrested, that is all. And in a few weeks, when we enter Paris, you will be released and be one of us again. Here in this very hotel the Emperor will reward."

The Prince stood transfigured, and breathing heavily, moved by the proud emotions that surged within him. The little old figure that sat before him looked up with

an intense expression that might have meant anything—fierce admiration or fierce loathing. There was silence for a while. Then the Prince opened the drawer of a table and took out a small shining thing.

"You see everything is ready to the last detail," he went on, with a smile. "You will fire two shots with this well over the head of the Ambassador. I have arranged that you shall be overpowered, not too roughly, by members of his Excellency's suite. I am expecting the Ambassador every moment, and you will be able to have a little rehearsal together."

Almost mechanically M. Robespierre reached out his hand and took the pistol.

"Handle it carefuly," laughed the Prince, "both now and to-morrow."

There was a knock at the door and von Gassner entered.

"This is—Herr Haase," said the Prince, pausing a little before the name. "Everything is understood and agreed upon."

Von Gassner looked sharply at M. Robespierre, who had risen slowly.

"I once saw Baron von Kuhling," he said, "but this gentleman does not seem to recall him. I remember him as having a duelling scar on the cheek."

"But impossible! It must be! I have told him everything!" cried the Prince.

"But you are not Baron von Kuhling, otherwise Herr Haase," exclaimed von Gassner, addressing M. Robespierre directly.

"It is quite true," replied M. Robespierre calmly. "I am a simple French citizen, and not a disgraced German nobleman. My name is Robespierre."

The Prince gave a shout of anger and dismay.

"Then how do you come here? How is it that you are in my room impersonating another man?"

"It is a happy accident which I will not bother to explain. It is sufficient that I know all your dastardly plan against my country. It is truly German." M. Robespierre's tone was very cold and cutting.

The Prince's face went white and distorted with anger, and he slowly raised his clenched fists to his head.

"Gently," said von Gassner. "We must see quietly to this."

But the Prince's anger exploded.

"You hound, you miserable hound!" he cried, and leaping on M. Robespierre bore him to the ground. There was a muffled report.

"Oh, *mein Gott, mein lieber Gott*," exclaimed the Prince, and rolled off his victim on to the carpet.

Von Gassner rushed forward and bent over his master, with a cry of dismay.

VI

THE Prefect of Police had for a long time past taken a considerable interest in the Hotel Grand Imperial. So that when he received a letter from Antoine written on the notepaper of that august establishment he was not slow to appreciate the point.

"What is our friend doing there?" he mused. "He must be on the track of something."

Half an hour later it was reported to him that a certain unassuming visitor who was staying at the hotel was none other than Prince Ernst of Saxe-Wolmar. The Prefect began to put two and two together. He decided to make the hotel the objective of one of the nocturnal strolls which it was his frequent custom to take round Paris.

Consequently some ten minutes after M. Robespierre had disappeared into the Prince's suite there was knock on the door of Antoine's *salon* and the Prefect stepped into the room. He found himself in the presence of Antoine and Bourdot, who stared at him in some dismay.

"I was just passing," said the Prefect, with a gentle smile, "and it occurred to me that you might want a little information on the matter you consulted me about."

"It was excessively kind of you," said Antoine, "but you told me all I wanted to know."

"*Permettez,*" said the Prefect, as if he had not heard, and produced a cigarette case. He evidently intended to stay awhile.

Antoine endeavored to hide his emotions and engage in polite conversation. The talk inevitably drifted to the question of war. It was interrupted by a telephone ring that caused Antoine to sit bolt upright in his chair. Then with as little show as possible of haste he stepped into his bedroom.

There was a tense feeling in the air and the Prefect and Bourdot sat quite silent. No sound came from Antoine. A minute later he appeared in the doorway, his face white and startled. It was obvious that he had heard something grave. He looked at the Prefect and appeared to be turning something over in his mind.

"There is something you should know at once," he said. "Prince Ernst of Saxe-Wolmar who is staying in this hotel has just been shot."

The Prefect bounded out of his chair.

"*Vous dites!*"

"I have just heard something on the telephone. I can't explain it all now. There was some hurried conversation in German which I did not understand. Then

a moment later a voice I knew said "The Prince has been shot."

"Where is he?" cried the Prefect.

"In the suite at the end of the corridor there," replied Antoine pointing.

The Prefect was out in the corridor in a flash, the others following him. As they stepped through the doorway a distinguished looking man came walking towards them. All three recognized him at once. It was the German Ambassador. With a little start of surprise he recognized the Prefect at the same moment. They had been together on many cordial occasions. It was, on both sides, an awkward meeting.

"I am just calling on a friend," said the Ambassador with a smile, after a mutual greeting, and made as if to pass on.

"One moment, Your Excellency," said the Prefect. "I have just heard there has been an accident—to Prince Ernst."

The Ambassador's eyebrows went up in surprise and dismay.

"An accident—to Prince Ernst. I don't understand."

"Perhaps it will be as well if we go in together—pardon me." And with that the Prefect led the way.

The door was locked. It was opened by M. Robespierre, who stood there with a revolver in his hand.

"Come in—everybody," he said calmly, and waved them in with a nonchalant sweep of the weapon.

The Prince was lying on the carpet in the center of the room, where he had fallen. Von Gassner stood a little distance back, his arms folded, silent and motionless. It was the little Egyptologist, revolver in hand and quite naturally calm, who dominated the scene.

"My God, who has done this? Is he dead?" cried

the Ambassador, rushing forward to the prostrate figure.

"He is apparently quite and absolutely dead," came the level tones of M. Robespierre. "He did it himself. And when your Excellency has finished examining the deceased I have something important to say to you."

The Ambassador stood up with a dazed expression on his face and looked hard at M. Robespierre.

"Who are you?" he asked.

"That does not matter for the moment. But at least I know who you are, and was expecting your visit. By an accident which need not be explained I was here to-night in the place of Herr Haase—otherwise Baron von Kuhling. And I am able to tell you that the interesting incident which it was proposed should occur when you make your departure from Paris to-morrow will not now take place."

"I do not understand. You say this dreadful tragedy was—was self-inflicted."

"Not precisely. It was more an accident. The Prince, believing that I was Herr Haase, had handed me this pistol to examine. A few moments later he learned that I was not Herr Haase. In his surprise and anger at the announcement he flung himself on me, threw me to the ground and the pistol—which was still in my hand—went off. The chief point, as I have already said, is that to-morrow's demonstration will not take place."

"I know nothing of any demonstration to-morrow," said the Ambassador harshly. "But as to the terrible thing which has happened to this poor young man, we must hear more of this. It is indeed fortunate, my dear Prefect, that you should be here. I cannot do better than leave this tragic affair—and also this mysterious individual who appears to have had so much to do with

it—in your hands. I am sure you will soon arrive at the exact truth. Will you please report anything you may learn to me at the Embassy. It seems to me that this may mean a very difficult incident of the gravest international importance—especially in view of the present situation."

"Very good, your Excellency," returned the Prefect with studied politeness. "And the unfortunate Prince? What shall we do with him?"

"I will make all arrangements as to that. You, Count," he turned to von Gassner, "had better come with me. You will of course be entirely at the disposal of the French authorities should they desire to ask you anything." The Ambassador cast a last mournful glance at the figure on the carpet, and was gone.

As he went through the doorway Inspector Sauvage appeared there. His chief beckoned him, and gave some rapid instructions. Then he approached M. Robespierre.

"I am afraid you must consider yourself under arrest until this affair is more satisfactorily explained," he said.

"With pleasure," returned the other. "Please take this." And he handed over the revolver. "And I think that, together with my friend Poiret, I can explain everything to you."

VII

They sat in Antoine's salon. M. Robespierre and Antoine had told all they knew.

"All that you say is obviously true," said the Prefect. "But it is a dreadful thing when private individuals

meddle in the gravest international crises. Heavens! What a situation."

"He was a miserable wretch, and deserved to die," said M. Robespierre calmly. "I am by no means sorry that my hand did it."

"Possibly," said the Prefect. "But do you not see that the incident they were seeking is provided, and that the situation is aggravated tenfold. What matter what plot they were hatching! We may never be able to convince the world of it. But they will make the death of this princeling—*bon Dieu*, what will they not do with it! It is a desperate business. I dare not think of what may come of it. *Bon Dieu! Quelle situation!*"

The Prefect sprang up and began to pace the floor agitatedly.

"You should have reported this affair of the Prince and Herr Haase to me immediately," he burst out. "This should have been no mere question of newspaper enterprise. It is too big—it is war—everything. The Foreign Office will go mad! Here we are with the death of this Prince on our hands. How it is to be explained? They may even declare war on this very point."

There was silence in the room. Antoine felt that he was being unjustly reproached. But it was hardly the moment to interrupt the Prefect. And indeed the situation was immensely grave.

There came the buzz of a telephone bell in the stillness. It was Antoine's own instrument ringing, and not the other. He picked up the receiver and heard Morissot's voice asking for him urgently. Antoine announced himself.

"Well, it is all over," came Morissot's voice.

"What do you mean?"

"It is war. Their patrols crossed the frontier late

this afternoon. There is no drawing back. Germany has not yet declared war on France, but she has started it."

"Hold a minute," said Antoine. He told the news to the others. It was received in absolute silence. For some moments no one spoke. It was the tensest moment in the life of every man present, even though the events of the evening had told them surely what was coming. Then M. Robespierre's voice was heard:

"At any rate that delivers us from this infamous princeling. There is nothing for them to do but to take him back with them."

"Thank God for that," said Antoine fervently.

There was an immense feeling of relief in the room at this. The war had not yet reached them. But the incubus of the dead Prince had been heavy on their minds, and its removal left them feeling comparatively elated. Even the Prefect relaxed a little.

Antoine heard Morissot's voice on the telephone again:

"I have been thinking, *mon cher* Antoine. This is a time when all Frenchmen, of whatever kind, must pull together. To-night I have written an article in praise of the Government."

In spite of all that had happened, Antoine could not restrain a laugh.

"Nothing short of a European war would have made you do that, *mon cher ami*," he replied.

VIII

Monsieur Prosper Leblanc came out of the Santé Prison one bright morning in August. The slow, interminable inquiry into his tangled financial affairs

had left him a changed and broken man. Gone was the lustrous, confident demeanor of the prosperous *homme d'affaires*. He was not yet a convicted man. He and his friends—some of them men of influence who were anxious for their own sakes that nothing should happen—had fought too fiercely for that. The best lawyers had been engaged. Therefore the *affaire Leblanc* promised to go on forever without ever coming to trial.

And with the great change that had come over France in the first few days of the war his friends had succeeded in obtaining permission for his temporary release. It was not difficult to do. Somehow the finances of M. Leblanc had suddenly seemed not to matter.

Friends met him at the prison. He seemed listless and dispirited, but as soon as possible escaped them, and drove away.

His new-found liberty meant little to him. For a long time past in prison he had brooded over one thing. He had become a man with an *idée fixe*. His thoughts constantly dwelt on Antoine Poiret, the man who had prospered on the ruins of one of his own enterprises. For some reason he could not have explained, this galled him more than all the rest of his misfortunes. And he had coldly determined to shoot Antoine at the first opportunity. It was the one thought in life which gave him any pleasure.

Now, immediately after leaving prison, he stopped his cab at the first gunsmith's shop he saw and bought a revolver and cartridges. Then he drove on to the offices of *La Lumière*.

He knew that war had already begun. He was conscious that the streets and the boulevards, with their many shuttered shops, had a curious and lifeless look. But these things made little or no impression on his

brain. He was conscious only of his own affairs, and particularly of the one in hand.

He arrived at the office and walked boldly upstairs. It was morning but even so they were strangely quiet. He walked from room to room and found nobody. Descending the stairs again he found Jean, the old doorkeeper, coming up. M. Leblanc, unrecognized, questioned him. Practically everybody was away, mobilized, said Jean; M. Poiret amongst them. The paper was coming out with the greatest difficulty.

M. Leblanc wandered dully down the boulevard. He was suddenly deprived of his grim purpose, and had nothing to put in its place. At the corner of the Place de l'Opera the heartening sound of trumpets caught his ear. A battalion of infantry came marching bravely by, the men loaded with the trappings of war, their long bayonets glittering in the sun.

M. Leblanc warmed a little as he looked at them, but he was still a man wrapped in his own unhappy dreams. And then a number on a tunic collar caught his eye. Bon Dieu, but it was the 127th of the Line, his old regiment! His dull eyes lighted up as he thought of the life in barracks in the old days. Where were his old companions of the regiment now? He became conscious that the air was throbbing with martial music; that people were cheering, that girls were throwing flowers and kisses; that here and there women were weeping and that the soldiers were throwing back the salutes and affection of the crowd with happy laughs and waves of the arm.

M. Leblanc, weaver of many financial webs, cynical *homme d'affaires*, felt a dampness in his eyes. By Heaven! but these bright young men were off to fight the enemy, the hated German from beyond the Rhine, the everlasting Prussian! France was at war!

There came a wave of cheering that caught him up in its rush and started him cheering too. And with the tumult at its height he saw a soldier, his red *képi* set jauntily on his head, whose face he knew. It was Antoine Poiret!

M. Leblanc stopped cheering and his hand went instinctively to his pocket.

"*Poiret! bon Dieu*, and in my old regiment!" he shouted.

In the multitude of sounds Antoine caught his own name and turned his head. Their eyes met and said many things. But for Antoine the past was dead and finished with. He was off to war. He waved his hand in farewell.

M. Leblanc plucked off his hat and waved it in reply.

"Hurrah for the 127th of the Line," he shouted. "Hurrah for the old regiment! Vive la France!"

And Antoine had gone on his greatest adventure.

THE END